

# MMMCMXCI

THE ETERNAL WAR



## VOLUME I

STORIES BY R/THEETERNALWAR  
AND R/THEETERNALWARSTORIES

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THE YEAR IS 3991. THE WAR ALONG THE BORDERS OF CELTANIA, NEW VIKINGLAND AND AMERICA HAS BEEN RAGING FOR 1700 YEARS, AND NOW WE FIND OURSELVES AT A STALEMATE. THE WORLD, RAVAGED BY OVER 20 NUCLEAR WINTERS, IS AS GOOD AS DEAD. WE CAN'T FEED OUR PEOPLE, WE CAN'T FARM OUR LAND, WE CAN'T AFFORD TO DO ANYTHING BUT STRENGTHEN OUR MILITARY. SUPREME COMMANDER LYCERIUS HAS LEAD US FOR AS LONG AS ANYONE CAN REMEMBER, BUT HIS TIME IS PAST, AND A NEW RULER IS NEEDED TO TRY TO END THIS GOD-DAMN FIGHT. TIME TO STEP UP..

## ***Untitled Story – EliteKill***

It seemed like just another day in this never-ending war. The last few historians left (who needs history now, really) agree that it has been going on for at least 1500 years, but their estimates vary. Why does it matter, anyway. The leaders of the remaining superpowers are locked in this pointless struggle, with no breakthrough. I have no idea how the Vikings keep being so consistent over such a long time, but the Communists have had the same family (and principles) in power ever since the war began and over here in America we've hooked up our president to a computer so he could rule forever. What a brilliant plan that was... Each nation is powerful just enough so neither can fall. Every time a city is captured, it is taken the next day. When roads are build in order to help dry up the swamps, they are immediately destroyed. The only way to rebuild our Earth is for someone to win, but that won't happen. At least, that's what I thought until now.

Our forces took another city by dawn. Nothing was special about it, apart from the fact that it was the first time it has been under American control since the war began. It's not that it was heavily guarded, only it was never deemed important enough for capture. As a part of our new military "strategy", we had to capture it for the slight chance that an inhabitant over there could have any sort of solution to the famines. We didn't find a man, but we got the solution alright.

I was being escorted into a large house on the outskirts of the city. It was a big, empty mansion, abandoned for generations according to the locals, who think it is haunted and avoid coming near it. Nevertheless, we had to comb the entire town, so someone had to go there. I, a fragile and valuable scientists sent to the front lines to find some way to grow food in the irradiated swamps that make up most of the world now, am accompanied by a small squad to keep me guard against any sort of dangers. They aren't very smart (to be fair, most of the smart people left in this world aren't anywhere near combat) but they provide good company. As we enter the mansion I order them to split up and search the house. If they are to see anything unusual - they are to report it immediately. All protocol, we

have done it a hundred times in the past year alone, and yet I always excited by the fact that I am giving orders to these armed men.

An hour passes and we find nothing, apart from a sprawling library in the basement. While we should move forward to more important targets, the idea of so many books untouched for such a long time intrigues me, along with my guards. We decide to call in a code 4057, which means we found something of interest and will be taking out time exploring it. We didn't expect finding much from the books, but it is a good distraction from the situation outside.

The library is beautiful, modeled after the old ones that were in medieval castles. My guards all pick up some fiction books and start reading to their enjoyment, which surprises me as I never saw them take leisure in books. I go around the bookshelves, searching for something more interesting than mere stories, when an odd book strikes my eyes.

It is labeled "The Secrets of Life", without an author. The cover is colored with a strong crimson color and gold linings, and it is huge, at least 3000 large pages. I don't know what prompted me to pick it up, the fact that it could be what we're actually looking for or the amazing aesthetics of its cover, but the moment I lift it up from the bookshelf a loud, rumbling sound is heard.

All of the guards spring to their feet, clinching their rifles reflexively, and turn to me. The bookshelf in front of me starts to turn, introducing a new, secret tunnel that is unlike anything I've seen before. Even though this was probably built thousands of years ago, the hidden tunnel looks like it's from the future. It is a shiny, chrome color with light-blue wires running along the ceiling. We slowly make our way deeper into the ground, when a huge door comes in front of us. I walk to a control panel nearby and pull a big-looking lever, the only intractable object I can see, and the door begins to open slowly sideways, into the wall. Behind it lies a large chamber, empty apart from a huge machine connected to the wires we saw before. The machine is just a cube, around 5 meters a side, with a large screen on the edge towards the door. As I approach it, a keyboard comes out of the cube and the screen turns on.

The keyboard is covered in English, although by the font I can tell it's an old variant of the language. Apart from the letters, which

are ordered in a formation I cannot understand (the top-most row starts with the unusual combination QWERTY), I see the numbers 0 through 9, four arrow keys each pointing a different direction, a large button with "Enter" written on it and another, long key with no label. I instinctively press the "Enter" button and a presentation begins on the screen.

Apparently, the mansion belonged to one of the wealthiest men alive in history. I couldn't really understand how he did earn his fortune, but it was something to do with Quantum Computers, a technology long outdated. In the year 2012, which was 1979 years ago, there was some international panic from a predicted solar storm which would "end humanity as we know it". The owner of this mansion built this machine, which is a huge database, to serve as a testament to human advancements in case civilization would be wiped out. The presentation goes on to explain how to navigate the database, and then fades to white as a nice looking menu pops out.

The screen presents me with four options: "Browse Categories", "Search Entries", "Replay Introduction" and "Export Data". Without hesitating I search "swamp vegetation", only to find an entry about the long extinct Eucalyptus tree, which was used in the past to dry up swamps. Apparently back in 2012 no one even attempted to grow food in marshes. I try to search for more solutions, but find nothing I can use. Just as I am about to give up and report the whole area so other scientists can drool over the historic database, I have one idea. An idea that proves to be the key to ending this war.

I simply search for "World War", and find 3 main entries. "World War 1" and "World War 2" were two large-scale conflicts in the 20th century that are as good as ancient history to me, but what catches my eye was an entry titled "World War 3". It describes a hypothetical war, identical to the one that has been going on for the past 1500 or so years - nuclear holocaust, completely global, likely never to end. And then there is a section named "theorized solutions". Reading this completely baffles me. I mean, it seems so simple that I just can't believe nobody thought about it before. In the time this database was composed, this third world war seemed close than ever with the rise of the country Iran as a dictatorship, which aimed to build

nuclear weapons. To combat this while not starting a war so big, Western Civilization would develop "computer viruses" which disabled the nuclear facilities and halt Iran's advances.

Now, cybernetic warfare is nothing new, but a specific virus, launched in the summer of 2012, caught my eye. Codenamed "Phantom", the virus didn't target Iran's nuclear facilities, but rather the personal computers of the people who worked there. The virus implemented specific pop ups and advertisements in those computer which sub-consciously turned the workers and scientists against the government. Then, using undercover agents, the western countries sparked a small revolt, which usually would not make a dent to the government. However, as the revolt broke, the nuclear facilities' employees immediately joined, brainwashed by the virus, and thus the rebels got hold on nuclear technologies. The government quickly fell, and the war was averted.

The problem with using viruses was that now, important facilities can't be breached - virtual security is just that good. However, the Average Joe doesn't have access to that kind of security, so this plan could work. This could mean the end of the war. The rebirth of humanity. I explain the situation to my squad, and they all agree we must contact a high-ranking officer ASAP. We run outside, but as we enter the library we hear explosions above. We exit the house, only to be greeted by a missile launched from a drone up above.

As I lie near a bush, I manage to get a glance around. My guards are all dead, most of them mutilated beyond recognition by the missile. We must have spent a few hours down there, because it seems like the Celtics are launching an assault to capture the town again. As everything around me blurs out, I realize that with our death, the information of the virus will be lost until someone else visits this mansion, and now, seeing as it's mostly destroyed by the offensive, seems highly unlikely. If this war is going to end, it would be thanks to something else. It's funny, I just read how this "World War 3" is likely to never end, and as I was about to finish it, the same war made sure that it would keep on going. I look back at the mansion, now collapsing, before I black out, probably for good this time.

## ***The Solution: Chapter 1 – EliteKill***

Gabriel Collins was an exceptional young man. He was born in the Inner Capital to a wealthy family and excelled in school, graduating two years early at the age of 16. Being a born athlete as well as an intelligent student, he decided to pursue a career in the military, dreaming of one day being a high-ranking general, leading the American forces to victory and finally wiping out the Vikings and Celts. Since he could not enlist until he was 18, he attended a special academy and began training as soon as he got out of school. The world might be a devastated wasteland at this point, but the Inner Capital along with New Chicago and Seattle, which house the richest and most powerful men left alive, are still sprawling cities that provide some glimpse into the world that could have developed if it weren't for the war.

Now, at the age of 20, Gabriel leads a special squad, overseeing the captures of the most important cities. While this usually means fighting on the front lines and assaulting strategic settlements, this time was different. The target was a small city, which under regular circumstances wouldn't have bothered anyone. However, after a few hundred years under Viking control and for the first time since the war began, yesterday at dawn it was captured by American forces. As a part of a new strategy, the generals need to capture as many cities as possible and send in specialized scientists accompanied by guards to investigate and search for a way to grow vegetation in the swamplands which now cover most of the Earth.

Usually, after a city is captured, a window of 24 hours is given to the soldiers until they are given the orders to prepare for a counterattack. Most of the times it takes the enemy forces at least two days to regroup and retaliate, but you can never be too safe. In that window the specialized scientists scour the city, which is more than enough time. However, yesterday's capture proved to be an anomaly. It started with the scientist calling in a "4057", which means an object of interest has been found, and continued with the Vikings assaulting the city within 8 hours of losing it. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that there is something that the Vikings don't want the Americans to

know about this place, and that's exactly why Gabriel's squad was transferred for the attack.

The Viking offensive was swift and decisive with heavy casualties on the American side as the soldiers were basically on break. Most of the rifles were out of reach, and some of the men were even asleep as the bombs fell. Fortunately, the 4057 code alerted the High Command to send some reinforcements before the assault began, so the counter-attack shouldn't take much longer to start. Now that Gabriel arrived, the commanding officer, Sgt. Haysem, estimates that within 3 hours the troops will start entering the city.

Gabriel's squad is comprised of five men, including himself. Harvey and Donald are twins from San Francisco, who managed to survive the flooding of the city by running with their family to the mountains nearby. They are the squad's sharpshooters, most of the times splitting up from the rest to provide cover and intel from afar. They are almost identical in every way, and take turns between each mission on shooting and spotting.

Brad is the main gunner, usually going in first to every confrontation. He is a large, dark skinned and ruthless soldier with custom-made armor that makes him almost bulletproof. On one occasion a grenade exploded right next to his feet and all he lost was his small toe, leaving him with 3. Finally, Snare is the technician and the smartest one of the group, usually handling anything technological. However, he can still hold his own in a firefight and in fact might be the best shot other than the twins.

The group arrived at the camp in high noon, seeing the preparations at their peaks. Trucks were being unloaded constantly before clearing the way for more supplies to come, troops were landing at the airstrip and immediately taken to briefings, and the final checks on the unmanned drones were being made. Haysem points the squad into a large tent on the far side of the camp, and tells them he'll be right there.

Gabriel enters the improvised command center to find men hard at work. It is mostly set up, but some displays are malfunctioning so technicians run around frantically, trying to figure out what's wrong. The rest of the computers are manned by intelligence collectors, who attempt to hack the local Viking networks or intercept their communications.



"Snare, looks like they could use your help here" Gabriel whispers, "they don't seem to have a clue on how to fix those screens." "I'm sure they'll figure this out, I fly for 13 hours to be a maintenance guy"

A tall man approaches the squad and introduces himself as Peter, the commanding intelligence officer, and leads them into a side room.

"Come this way, Haysem will join us in a moment and we will begin"

The room has a large desk in the center with 7 seats around it. The squad sits down just as Haysem and Peter enter the room, who join them around the desk. The sergeant takes out a small device from his picket, presses a button and a huge hologram appears above the desk. He begins to speak.

"Alright, this is the city's layout"

It is shaped like a square, quite small at around two kilometers on each side. There are a few tall buildings in the center, but the rest are private homes, no more than two stories tall.

"You can see that the city center sports a few skyscrapers. Those were built during the war and can withstand a head on ICBM hit. As such, most of the important offices and documents are stored there. This makes the downtown our most important objective when capturing the city, as it is likely that the Vikings have set up a command center in the top floors. The windows are made out of quasiglass, which means nothing can penetrate them without leveling the whole city as well, so our only option is to go in from the entrance, climbing up floor by floor"

"Can't we go in from the top?" Interrupts Brad, "Going in from the bottom seems like a death trap"

"We wish there was another way, but the Vikings have reinforced the roof and prevented any access from it. In addition, getting up there means we have to transport the troops by helis, which would paint them as easy targets for the AA. Back on topic, your job will be to go in and assist the capturing of those towers."

"Great, but what am I supposed to do? And my brother?" Shouts Donald, who realizes that there is no place for a sniper in this assault.

"Don't worry, you two have a separate assignment." Haysem once again presses a button on his remote, and the hologram shifts to the outskirts of the city.

"These are the ruins of a mansion. You probably heard about the code 4057, well this is where it originated from. Our scientist and his team went missing just as the Vikings attacked, and the area was hit directly by a drone. We suspect that the whole squad was killed, but you must retake the area and secure it to let our men uncover what was found yesterday. High Command suspects that the Vikings recaptured the city so quickly just because of that mansion, and the fact that it is heavily guarded is a testament that they're right."

"Wait, we're not going alone, right?" asks Harvey.

"Of course not," joins Peter, "You will lead 30 soldiers, giving orders from your spot and assisting the assault with suppressive fire. We also managed to get a few tanks from the front lines just for this operation. Is everything clear?"

The five soldiers looked at one another worryingly. While they always split up on their missions, they still are on the same assignment. This will be the first time that they truly separate ever since the squad was put together, and no one likes it. However, they all realize that this is a must, and that the twins will be of no use in storming the towers, so they all agree.

"Great" continues Haysem "we will leave for the towers in two hours. Harvey and Donald, you will start your attack an hour after we launch for the towers, so we will also serve as a distraction. Now, go outside and freshen up, we need all of you at your best. Dismissed!"

## ***Untitled Story – liberty4e***

Usually the experience of awaking with a pounding, throbbing pain in your temples and a sore body was testament to an evening to substance abuse. I was not used such experiences, with the rationing being rather severe the last decade. Alcohol was nearly impossible to find, and even the ratty home made versions of it were rare. Groggily I sat up, the darkness illuminated by burning embers and neighboring houses set alight and battered by the enemies missile barrage. Small arms fire peppered in the distance, giving a macabre closing hymn for this funeral pyre I was situated in. My men were eviscerated, severed limbs were settled around me like leaves falling from trees with the changing of the seasons. Not that I had ever witnessed that phenomena firsthand, but when I was younger the tales of lush green forests enthralled me. Once I viewed a grove of pines, with green needles. That valley is gone now, I thought morosely, destroyed in last years nuclear strike. Just radiation and despair now.

There was a faint moaning sound to my left under rubble from the mansion. I knew I would not want to see what was left of the soldier under there, but I stood and staggered over to him. Sometimes holding a dying ones hand or comforting them in their last moments made the transition easier. Usually we just put a bullet in their heads, but with potential enemy troops nearby I opted out of that decision.

I removed the pieces of brick, mortar, and wood to find one of the ammunition carriers from my machine gun section. "Help me, for God's sake, help," he croaked, barely audible. I could not find any trace of his legs below the knees. They were ragged stumps, with bits of bone poking out the ends. The charring from had moderately cauterized the viscous wound, staunching the blood loss that would have been quickly fatal otherwise. The boys midsection had been ripped open, and his innards were on his lap and pooling over the side of his torso. I could see the intestines glistening because of nearby fires. "Help me....I want to go home....it hurts so much," tears ran down his sooty face, little clean rivulets on an expiring surface. I knew he was done for, there was not one doubt about it.

Then I heard it. Vehicle engines. They were coming down the street. I ducked down beside the boy, and put my hand over his

mouth to cover up any sort of noise he could produce. The tires stopped and I heard soldiers dismount. Beads of sweat dripped down my face, and I could feel my body become tense. Were they friend or foe?

The injured child was squirming now, and the groans were becoming incessantly louder. "Shut up," I whispered coldly. "Just shut up or we're both dead." I saw the silhouettes of the men as they fanned out and could tell by the formation pattern that they were not friendly. They rifled through the rucksacks of my dead soldiers, taking rations and clothing. There would be nothing else of value in them. I watched one of the enemy take a small book from the pack of my dead medic presumably, as he had been the only openly religious man in the section. A lot of good that did him, I said in my head.

The boy flailed his arms, foolishly believing that the men who walked among us as we lay in rubble would provide aid. His rapid movements knocked over a chunk of concrete or stone, in the darkness I was unsure. Regardless it fell to the ground and bounced off a wooden beam with an audible noise. I could see some of the soldiers tense up and some hit the ground instantly, trying to get to cover. Some of them stood and did not move at all. I knew they were definitely new replacements, fresh meat for the unending slaughter.

One walked over to us, sauntering slowly, systematically pausing along the way. He was mere meters away. I wanted to run, to bolt away and scream. I let out a string of expletives mentally and felt my bladder relax without my permission. The urine soaked my trousers. My hand was still tightly gripped over the injured boy's mouth, but the soldier was so close he would hear the muffled breathing anyways. With caution I removed my trench knife from my sheath and had it at the ready. Any second this soldier would see that we were not debris. His rifle had a nasty looking bayonet on the edge, shining bright from the fires. "Steady boy, steady," I whispered. He did not comply and cried softly. I knew I was done for. The man had heard and was fast approaching, so I lay my head down on the scorched earth and feigned dead.

"Please, please...." the injured boy said to the enemy. I heard the bayonet stick into the boy's body with a sickly noise. He screamed, the death rattle piercing the night, and shook violently. I used his

death to my advantage and utilizing my free arm to keep my opponents rifle from rising I leaned up and quickly thrust my knife deep into his bowels. He shrieked as well and I felt warm blood coat my hand as he went limp and collapsed to the ground in horrific pain.

This situation had become worse with each second. The rifle was stuck because of the bayonet in my dying ammunition carrier, who was still screaming and flailing listlessly. He was dead but he did not know it. I pulled it out hastily and checked to see if the safety was off. Voices were yelling at each other in the darkness. I fired towards silhouettes and shadows, and made sure to put a round in my soldiers head to spare his suffering. I left the enemy I had stabbed writhing and groaning. As I sprinted away I could hear the hiss and snap of bullets as they narrowly missed me. The terror was unimaginable. I was manic, completely on auto pilot but horrified all the same. I wanted to crawl into my mind and stay there. I wanted this to end. I wanted to be in another body. It was like I was in a dream, just a long dark dream that was not meant to be. Poor eyesight and darkness combined are a ghastly duo and soon enough I tripped and fell, rolling down a slight hill before coming to a stop. Every bone in my body was sore, and I thought about the eyes of my young ammunition carrier. Larga something or other. First name unknown. Sixteen. Dead, for the nation and the people. Disgusting. His eyes were looking to me for safety, for aid. I effectively killed him. If his parents were living, I imagine how they would take the news. Yes commissar, we understand our son died valiantly and gloriously on the field of battle. It was a quick death and he was a hero, and all of that compiled bull shit. I felt dry in the throat, and vomited bile on myself as I sat in relative silence. How long had I been running? Thirty seconds, or thirty minutes, I would have not known the difference. My weapon was out of ammunition. But the bayonet was still on it, with a sixteen year olds blood of course. I stood and walked into the dark, the rumble of artillery in the distance a supple reminder of the utter hell I lived in.

## ***An End? - ProfSmiles***

We hadn't expected the Americans to take back Chicago. Legend has it us Vikings took it from them almost four centuries ago, and it's so small and insignificant they had never bothered retaking it. I'd been there a couple of times, and from what I can gather from the ruins and the myths of the citizens it was once a magnificent city made of glass and steel. Skyscrapers rose thousands of feet above the millions of citizens bustling about their daily lives in the streets below. That is, if one city's population could ever hold that much. But that's what people say, 72 million was one of the largest apparently. Hard to believe when you look around these days, even at our capital, which struggles to support less than 100,000.

Yeah, these days. "The Never Ending War." How can something be never ending? Oh well, that's not for me to think about. I get my rations for being a fighter, not a thinker. I've heard scientists have it pretty good; don't have to get dirty on the front line, decent amounts of food, I've even heard some have started families, an opportunity no soldiers get. Families? They're a thing of the past. Apparently children are smarter if they're conceived naturally and then modified, whereas us soldiers, we're just clones. It's always fun to join a new unit, look around and three of the 14 people look exactly like you. And then we all have numbers; no names. I'm #11155353. It's nice that my numbers form some sort of pattern, though I don't get much time to think about that, what with the fighting.

I suppose "The Never Ending War" is sort of accurate, a soldier will never get more than a days rest once they're back from the front lines. If they get back from the front lines. Our superiors seem to forget that clones are still human. Thousands upon thousands of lives are lost almost on the hour. Not like that matters to them. A thousand clones aren't hard to make, and they can be on the front lines as soon as their transport gets there after the three days training and growth. And I suppose that leads nicely up to where we are now. I was on my break in Vancouver, meeting up with some new spawns, when the intel that the Americans were launching an assault on Chicago came in. And just like that we were off.

We got there too late, of course. The Americans had occupied the city. Not that that was bad or different or hard, we'd just go in and

take it back, just like they'd done the day before, and happens to most of the other cities on this planet daily. There was no point using missiles. "Ranging it" was the slang used by us grunts. You know, like you attack from a.... Eh forget it. We couldn't use missiles because there was no doubt there was a SDI installed, which meant to do anything we were going to have to get into its effective range. And so we did. 4,427<sup>th</sup> Company launched a ground assault from the North. Nothing out of the ordinary, couple of hundred tanks and a few GDR's. Oh, "GDR" is "Giant Death Robot" – some more of our slang. The incursion was completely ordinary, and we half expected them to be wiped out in a few minutes! But they in fact did not face much resistance.

My squad was teamed up with three others to infiltrate the city from the West, hoping the Northern Incursion would prove enough of a distraction for us to break in and disable some of their defences. To be perfectly honest, once we were in the city walls we were scared shitless. Empty. Absolutely empty. We didn't know if they knew we were coming or what, but it made us nervous. It just wasn't right, you know? If it wasn't for the fact that we needed to stay silent, I reckon, heck, I know most of us would have been swearing. As I said, scared shitless. Our fears were almost confirmed when a group of American soldiers walked out of a building. We were dumb enough to be in the middle of the street. "CONTACT!" someone yelled and we all ran for cover while laying down covering fire. We had 60 men, they probably had 40, both sides had losses instantly as the street was filled with laser fire.

I dove behind a blockade just as a bolt singed my helmet. Too close, I thought. I looked beside me to see two more of our soldiers. One of them suggested we all stand up on the count of three and lay down some fire. We radioed across to the other side of the road to make sure they were ready with some grenades. We started counting. One. I positioned myself, ready to stand up. Two. Me and the soldier next to me's eyes met. I could see the fear in his eyes. Ha, sounds like something from a story book, but you try fighting in a war. Three. We all stood up, rifles blazing. The Americans were caught off-guard, thinking most of us had been killed and the rest fleeing. A few were downed instantly, while the others tried to fire back. Without taking my finger off the trigger, I looked to my right, across the road. As I

had hoped, the soldiers were standing up, grenades held high and ready to throw. They did, very accurately. The end result was almost all the Americans in the group being killed, a fair number more when most of the roof they were next to collapsed. Ion grenades will do that, you know.

But I wasn't celebrating. Aside from a quick glance to see the result, I was still looking right. Our soldiers were taking cover next to an alley, and to my horror I saw four figures moving through the shadows, guns raised, towards our troops. I shouted, NOO!!, trying to bring my rifle in time to fire back. My fears were confirmed when the figures' guns flashed, lighting up their uniforms; their American uniforms. All our soldiers in front of them were razed instantly. Luckily another one of us had seen them, too, up the street, and as soon as they left the alley they were gunned down by him and myself.

I ran over to the limp bodies on the ground. There was no chance they were alive – they were all direct hits, but I had hope all the same. False hope. And the costs of the war hit me full on. I had been mostly insensitive to it, but I was overcome with the sudden realisation that these men laid their lives down in the false hope that there might be a winner in this war. It sounds stupid coming from a soldier, I mean, what do I know about it? But that is honestly what I thought. Perhaps it determined my actions later that day. After regrouping we continued pushing through the city. There was no time, nor intentions largely, to mourn losses, but I paid my own silent tribute. We eventually met up with the Northern Incursion Force, and were tasked with spreading out through the city to eliminate any remaining enemy forces. My squad and one other was assigned to go East. We were to go to the very outskirts of town until we were at the wall, and then to come return. Shoot to kill.

We were approaching the wall and had only found three stray soldiers thus far. We were looking forward to the idea of turning around when we came across an old looking mansion with American soldiers outside. We instantly took cover but it was too late and they had seen us. One of them ran inside, probably sent for reinforcements I thought, and immediately reached for my Targetor. Hmm? Oh, yeah, it's a device that lets us target something to be taken out from afar. I targeted this building while the other soldiers fired on



the Americans. A green light came on on my Targetor – target confirmed. I released the switch, and a few moments later missiles came raining from sky, coming from our new outpost in the city centre. It was perfect timing, too, as more personnel were emerging from the building.

The mansion was razed instantly, of course. I think every soldier was killed in the blast, too. My troops and I waited for any signs of movement, and after there was none for a few minutes, we moved in for a closer look. There were a handful of survivors, and we were quick to disarm and apprehend them. But there was one who caught my attention. He was out cold, but certainly alive, pretty standard in every way, except he wore a white lab coat.

I assigned a few soldiers to stay hidden with me and guard our prisoners, while the rest of the group finished the sweep. They met us on their way back after an uneventful walk. I had managed to wake the scientist up, but couldn't get anything out of him. We then began the walk back to the city centre where the rest of our companies would probably be waiting.

You'd say that was uneventful, would you? Well, I suppose so would I. Except for one thing. During his sleep the scientist was muttering something about an end. The end. What do you mean To what? – to this! To this war! An end to the war... Huh, unlikely if you ask me. But I had hope, all the same.

## ***Great Nation Radio: AD3991 June 12<sup>th</sup> – minusonethlaw***

Hello and welcome to great nation radio, hail to our leader, Lycerius!

Today we bring the battle report. Our valiant men have been fighting tooth and nail against the vile Vikings, who aim to bring our wonderful nation to it's knees. However our firepower and armies are so well equipped we are able to keep the aggressors at bay. Remember it is your war bonds that are tightening the grip on the enemies of the State. Four new roads have been finished this month, tipping the balance in our favour. Great Lycerius!

Be on the lookout for shifty characters on our beautiful streets. The enemy creeps and crawls like a coward, hiding behind disguises to upset our nation. Only you can help us! Report any divergent thinking or suspicious people to our loving police force, who with justice and for the people will deal with these troublemakers.

And now for a weather report. The Mittelswamp will have the usually cloud of insects we expect in June but crossings in the morning and evening from Edinborough to Turin will still take place. Radiation is very high in Monte Cristo bay, no thanks to Americans who wish to plague our waters with their nuclear filth by planting bombs under the seats of children. Only the sovereign peoples of the Celts could survive such an onslaught.

Thank for listening to our bulletin - Lycerius works for you the people!  
This is Great Nation Radio.

## ***Three Stories, One War – lordmalifico***

### **"Following Orders"**

The sky was grey and the floor was covered in the usual ash. It was hard to make out what month it was. The wind was cold and Drest hardly could stand it. He'd much rather be inside of his hab unit, but at least he was luckier than the men on their knees before him. American spies, his officer told him. In reality, they were workers. Workers caught stealing.

He peered at the men through his gas mask. Reaching into his heavy duster, he took a deep breath and lit a flare, throwing it in the center of the group. There wasn't a word said between the two parties. He knew what he was told to do and they knew what was bound to happen.

He loaded a clip into his rifle and took a deep breath, resting the stock of the old gun against his shoulder. "Le do thoil, ach a insint dom áit a bhfuair tú é." He asked, a quiet, pleading tone in his voice. Silence. He let out a sharp exhale, his mask turning it into a low howl.

A comrade approached from his left. "Níl aon phointe i ag caint leo. Just a dhéanamh air." His teammate offered him a sharp stare, green eyes focusing through faded gas-mask lenses.

Drest gave a hesitant nod.

### **"Archaeology."**

A group of Civil Workers marched down a dusty, abandoned city street. It was one of those bright, energetic days where the sun almost came through the clouds and the wind wasn't as bitter. Sure, the buildings were old and mostly rubble, bombed nearly thirty times in the past millennium, but Fate was kind to the bold.

One of the workers wandered into an old, roofless building with a collapsed wall. A mummified skeleton sat under a collapsed pillar. Lucky- It looks like this place was ignored or missed by other scavenge raids. Cadyrne knelt down and went through the rags that once made up the man's clothing. A watch- A pocket watch.

The man's eyes lit up with shock. Gold, with brass etchings. "To my beloved James." He read with some difficulty. He slowly stood up, cackling with glee. He tried his best to remember, but the only thing even remotely as shiny as this was one of the buildings he saw in passing in Cardiff as a child.

"Faigh rud éigin?" A colleague yelled out, alerted by the noise. The scavenger cleared his throat and stuffed the watch into his jacket. "Gan aon, Ní dhéanfaidh aon ní ach cnámha." He turned. There was a man at the doorway, wearing a tight black jacket and holding a knife. The patches on his jacket sleeves signified an American military unit. The scavenger didn't have time to scream. Stabbed in the chest and thrown to the ground, only to be stabbed multiple times in a follow through. The other Americans wandered past in silence.

The forces had to move in under the brief bout of good weather. Tanks were on the way, blazing through bone-strewn remnants of a city lost to time and the war. It was six days to Cardiff, if they were lucky.

### **Fun Facts for the Common Man, 3992 EDITION!**

~~(EDITED BY THE MINISTRY OF PUBLIC INFORMATION AND EDUCATION)~~

~~We have always been at War with Vikingland.~~

~~We are proud allies with Vikingland.\*~~

~~Vikingland's defeat is inevitable.\*~~

~~Vikingland will help us rebuild the world.\*~~

~~What should you do if you meet a Viking? Stab him!\*~~

Love your Nordic brother for he cares for the common man!

~~Vikings attack from behind as to better stab Celts in the back!~~

Did you know that Vikingland is 90% swampland?

That's almost entirely swampland! ~~Serves them right~~

Americans hoard food rations and block shipments to hospitals!

Americans have over sixty racist epithets for Celts!

American weapons are made by the blind and the crazed!

Americans still hold true to silly belief systems!

Did you know the Revolution is over a THOUSAND years old?

That's over ten one hundreds!  $100 = \text{ten tens!}$

Ten is ten ones! One is what comes after zero!

-Can you read? Please apply at your local Party Office for possible officer employment in the People's Defense Force! All Officers receive the Supreme Commander's favor!

## ***Great Nation Radio: AD 3991 June 13<sup>th</sup> – lordmalifico***

Good morning, evening and afternoon, my brothers and sisters! Today is June 13th, 3991, and this is your daily news, weather and bulletin! Let us begin by offering a word of praise for our beloved Party, who ensures our survival in these troubling times!

Last night's freak thunderstorm in Stirling caused severe damage to a local farm and the fire caused has burned half of the farm's potato harvest! As such, food rations in Cardiff and surrounding regions have been marked down by a quarter to help our brothers in need survive!

Good news from the Viking Front! An enemy camp was discovered yesterday by our brothers in the People's Defense Force and over sixteen enemy scouts were captured! Despite lies and claims of innocence, party official Ailis Kelly has vowed that all information shall be obtained from them through *any means* necessary!

The war may be ending soon! Word from the Party Headquarters in Cardiff reveal that talks of a ceasefire and nuclear disarmament in America are indeed on the table, as our longtime rival has both starved itself and fallen prey to famine, such as the fate of all foolish fundamentalists!

Divine providence doesn't seem to be in the cards for them, so says this radio operator! Remember, petty superstitious beliefs are the opiate of the masses! You must rise above the mistakes of our enemy and show them the strength and tenacity of the Celts! Long live our permanent Revolution! Long live our immortal Party!

And now, word of a mandate from the Party Office of Laws and Decrees.

It reads..

"This is a mandate to all Celtic citizens within our borders. Due to incidents in rural areas and reports from traveling Officers and law enforcement agents, it is noted that recent disappearances outside of Wrexham were caused by a band of highwaymen. The crimes of said criminals are not for the faint of heart, but know that they have been caught and executed. Theft and cannibalism will not be tolerated

within our borders. Such is the activity of the desperate and inhuman. If you act as an animal, you will be put down like an animal. This concludes the mandate."

And now, the weather.

Expect more heavy thudnerstorms today mixed with radioactive fallout. Remember to keep your breathing units secure at all time and to wear thick clothing if venturing outside of your home or workplace.

The usual summer insect levels remain as-is.

On the bright side, ozone and allergy levels remain at zero! A thirty year record remains, as noted by the Party weather almanac! In celebration, the Party has decreed that one ration of chocolate will be allowed to all working families.

Today is a good day, fellow Celts! Fight and continue the struggle of the Revolution! This concludes our Great Nation Radio daily bulletin!

## ***The End of Eternity – lordmalifico***

[The year is 4020.](#)

Cardiff. The last bastion of humanity. A grave for thousands

The War was finally over, ended with a mutual nuclear exchange and bombing run in the late 3990's that the world had seen a painful number of times in her past. Civilization, once holding on by a thread, was now a mere afterthought. After the other Celtic cities were bombed and burned by nuclear fire, the Party launched the remaining nuclear warheads in it's arsenal, triggering the ancient ruins of the Strategic Defense Initiative. America and Vikingland were destroyed within the hour, and Cardiff burned for a month due to the counterattack.

The streets were calm and quiet. There is no life. Not even insects to pick at the skeletons left behind, or carrion birds to pick at the remnants of the dead crops. The Revolution's vast dream of reclaiming Earth ended with a quiet whimper on a Thursday evening. The story of humanity ended with a long, painful chapter written in ash-polluted blood and tears.

It's over five hundred and sixty million years since that sad day, and the only remnants left behind are long-forgotten remnants of our mark on the planet, barely recognizable ruins like Mount Rushmore and the buried Viking nuclear submarines at the bottom of the ocean floor.

But something remains.

Vaguely humanoid creatures huddle around one another in a cave, murmuring to themselves in a bestial, grunting language. They pause and freeze, focusing at the mouth of the cave. One of their own had returned, carrying a large broken-off stick with a raging flame on the wide end.

He hoists the torch into the air and lets out a shrill howl of excitement. His clan joins him, hollering and howling in shock and excitement at the new discovery.



## ***Shaun Has Gone for a Soldier – Freestripe***

They never come home. Every time the press gangs come through they take all the young men with them. An engineer to build a road if they're lucky. If not that then months or a few years servicing either a tank or gun, or slogging through the marshes picking up parasites.

Most never get to see the enemy, they are the lucky ones - a thermonuclear fireball is a quick death. After that comes those who are killed outright by viking or american cannon. Those that are mutilated are never seen again, there is no room in our society for people who cannot pull their weight. The worst fate though is to be captured, the viking and americans are not shy to show us their protracted fate.

They just took my Shaun, still boyish in his face. They took him to their war. We all screamed patriotic phrases, acted as if it was all we could ever want. Our boys finally participating in the Great Struggle. I cheered as they took my son away. I thought I loved him enough to sacrifice myself, to make a stand. But I'm a coward same as the rest. They never come home.

## ***The Luck of the Devil – Dizzyd93***

It all seemed out of place, the soft breeze, the joy and laughter, the tall buildings of New Caledonia. Nothing seemed real as he made his way to the centre of the crowd where a hole was made for the returning heroes. The faces of these men, no-- not men; boys, were still trying to shake off the fear that had stricken them just the night before. They night that felt like years as they lay in wait in their foxholes for the firebombers the strafe the Americans out of their cots. These boys were heroes, and for what? Clearing out the charred bodies of those god loving hethans, so that they could stroll in and act triumphant. Just another flag to change..

That's when the guerrilla militia fired a RPG out one of the tall buildings, and he was jarred awake. It was no wonder the crowd felt to surreal, he hadn't been to victory parade since that day; and a building hasn't stood taller than that damn hotel in New Caledonia sine the Thor was dropped in 3981. The sickly sweet smell of the ass end of Deepmoore swamp filled his nose as he tried to stand up out of a pool f blood he hoped was his for once. He couldn't hear a thing but a faint ringing, his ears never rang as much since a MK24u fission grenade blew up half his recon squad and took a piece of ear with it. He had gotten lucky that day, just another story to tell..

His CO and half the platoons of his division had taken to calling him Lucky Lucifer, because there's is no way a man should be able take eleven bullets, a grenade and a half dozen other explosives, a sixty foot flight out of a wrecked APC, enough radiation to kill a radroach, much less live to be thirty-eight, without the luck of a devil behind him. It seemed he had done it again; he felt the familiar pit in his stomach as he looked around to see his platoon decimated by what he assumed was a Viking Gullveig fire bomb. Or maybe a M33Howler; it had been hard to tell the bombs apart for the past few months after CIC operatives infiltrated Viking factories nationwide and poisoned food supplies in an attempt to kill workers. That loudmouth ThreeDog on Great Nation Radio said the covert operation was an overwhelming success but the half dead Engineer platoon could tell you all about how there are still plenty of munitions coming out of Viking factories. Half of them don't even explode and the other half do damage in ways that

would make even an old man like Lucky Lucifer have nightmares. But he had made it out again, and with little more than a radrash and a bloodied headpiece. He had a half-dead assembly line to send another fuck you card to. Just another crazed worker in a factory across the Iron Wall...

He knew if he stayed in this death pit much longer he would get to meet the pyro-squads who swept the marsh on a five hour basis looking for stray CIC agents migrating from city to city, and he had no plans on seeing another burn ward. He made his way to the engine transponder and signaled his location to HQ. He didn't mention his platoon, he knew they'd be gator bait before the Bog-Runner tanks got there to pick him up. Wading through neck high, murky water for high ground, he got to a knoll tall enough to set off his last flare and wait.

Ten minutes later, after weathering his thousandth swarm of swamp flies, the Bog-Runners were in sight. He grabbed his rifle and made his way to the behemoths. Tank Commander Griffeth gave his usual three finger salute, he'd give more if he had 'em. Lucky Lou raised his rifle above his head in recognition and a smile broke out on both of their faces. Griffeth knew he had another Lucifer story to tell his CO buddies. At that, the familiar cackle of the Ull-12 sniper rifle echoed the swamp. Griffeth felt the bullet scream by as it pinged off the front of the tungsten hide of his Runner; looking up with a bigger smile at Lou. The smile had melted off a lucky man's face as he looked down at his bleeding chest. Right through the heart. He dropped and a hell of a fire fight zoomed across the blue sky he was now forced to look at. He knew what was coming, and didn't call for help. He knew he would be just another casualty. Just another body to burn. Soldiers no longer had the dignity of burial since the homeland ran out of solid ground to bury the hundreds of soldiers being sent home in boxes. He knew the division would solemnly talk about how Lucky Lucifer's luck had finally run out. But with his final breath, he thought how he had never been this lucky in his whole life. Just another fallen warrior...

## ***The Fall of the Sioux – dizzyd93***

Kona was finally on her way home from the factory, another tireless 16 hour day. She could hear the jets chasing the American recon planes flying much closer today. The other kids on the assembly line were talking about how their parents think the Americans were up to something; and it was only bolstered by the bio-bomb that exploded in the market down the street from the factory. No doubt another American spy. On the road home, she passed more soldiers and tanks than normal, she could hear desperate shouts emanating from the radios as they flew by. Something about the front line and a last ditch.. whatever that means.

Sleep that night was almost impossible; next to the constant cackle and boom of Sioux munitions, the ever-present drone of the hovering bombers made the house shake in ways it hadn't since the men with triangles on their flag had dropped all those bombs around town. The worst part was, it seemed to get louder with every passing minute. She could see the fire light up the sky as the front line guns fired, more and more desperately as the bombers sounded closer. She was scared now, she ran to her sisters' room and gathered them up and hurried them to the basement. Running to her parents room, she grabbed the only picture she had of them and flew down the stairs, locking all doors behind her.

Even in the basement, the light of the guns got brighter and brighter; and the humming louder and louder. Her sisters were all in tears now, there was no consoling them when the Americans were near town. Ever since Mama had been killed in the great fire four years ago, and Papa was assassinated in the Factory Guild Guerrilla uprising, what was left of the family had never been the same. But she could barely remember them now, she could barely think with all the noise. She felt the bare ground under her feet shaking as the artillery unit retreated into the city and the bombers finally started to drop bombs. Kona looked directly into the gaping faces of her sisters and couldn't ever hear their screams. No one could hear anything. There was only fire. And then.. nothing.

## ***A Face in the Crowd – Dizzyd93***

The following is the journal recovered from the last known location of agent 24E3220. The less relevant entries have been omitted. Entries show a slow decline of sanity as noted by military psychologists. In order to pass your CIC Operative Test and advance into the trial interrogation stage of your training, you must read these entries in full. You will be tested.

May 30, AD3975

I had a name once. A family. Friends in the military. I've been forced to leave it all behind; not suppress it, but forget it. I was told anything from my past that I try to keep can compromise the mission. It's been 142 days since my superiors deemed me worthy for the Celtic Infiltration Confederacy program. We had always heard of the CIC in the army. How if you showed any initiative above shooting your quota of 15 enemies a day, or told someone you knew how to read, you would be scooped up by CIC command and coerced into being a spy. Losing your past. Becoming the enemy. I had a name once. But after all this mental torture I couldn't tell you what it was if my life depended on it.

September 10, AD3975

I graduated the academy today. The bigwigs say I did so well on my torture tolerance and espionage tests that I have been promoted to CIC-02 and given my agent number. My new name is Agent 24E3220. I've been told to never forget this number, because it will be the only way for the mirrors over the Iron Wall to stay in contact with me. My fellow CIC-02's and I are being carted under the Wall on the secret underground railway our great leader Lycerius built centuries ago. They're all talking about how tomorrow is some kind of remembrance day for the Americans, and we're going to hit them where it hurts.

January 02, AD3976

I came home to my flat today with a familiar envelope in my mailbox. The local mirror had finally brought me an update on the American factories effected by the bio-bomb raid of the all cities by CIC-02 early last September. It would seem that the survivors and their families were spared no time or sympathy as the factory overseers were

locking all doors in all factories during shift hours. Those left blind and crazed by the bio-bombs can be seen slaving right beside the newly employed children of the less-fortunate dead. All the while a cross hangs from every wall, every neck. From even Jesus was not subjugated to this much torture. This religion is disgusting. This country is disgusting.

June 09, AD3979

I've been keeping my journal updated less and less lately. Guard patrols on the streets have me behaving my best on the way to the way to the American War Information Centre where I've been re-employed with the help of my buddy 24E32913 and my skill with numbers. I crunch the war cost tank by tank, division by division. But that's not really why I am here. The president will be in town next week for a briefing on war bonds. I drew the shortest straw at the last CIC-02 meeting in that little old lady's basement last month, so it seems that I will be doing the briefing. But from the orders we received from CIC command, there wont be much briefing going on.

June 17, AD3979

What have I done.. Everything was going so well.. and then it all went to shit in seconds. Fucking 24E3554.. He was every CIC-02's brother. Their best contact with what was real to all of us, the old world.. And he got half of ring killed. Who would have thought he was a double agent, who would have thought he would shoot us all in the back. I was THIS FUCKING CLOSE. I had the presidents throat in my hands. 24E2115 and and that rat bastard 3554 were at the door waiting to quickly and quietly gun down any secret service who heard the scuffle. I grabbed for my knife to cut that pig's throat and heard the familiar whisper of the Silenced MK13 and sickening thud of a body hitting the ground. I turn to see 3554 standing over 2115's dead body with his gun aimed at my head. What the fuck was I going to do? My one chance to get rid of this religious tyrant and I fuck it because I didn't want my brain splattered on the wall. I had to duck. I fucking HAD TO! I let go and heard the bullet scream by as i ducked my head. I drew my pistol and shot that fucker in the head. Then ran up to his body and added a couple extra bullets for 2115. I tried to kill the president.. I really did. But I look over to see that the secret service we were expecting are picking him up off the floor. Bastards must have been in

the ceiling the whole time, waiting for 3554 to waste us. What happened next was all a haze. The bullets. Running down the stairwell to the lobby. Seeing American soldiers on the side of the building gunning down CIC-02 agents, lined up, beaten and blindfolded. That rat 3554.. WE WERE HIS FUCKING BROTHERS. I just had to keep running, find a busy street corner, become a face in the crowd.. I could have killed him.. I could have killed him

August 2, 3979

I can feel them watching me. Everywhere I walk, watching me. They know it was me. Everyone I look at is staring at me. They are all going to rat me out. I know it. They keep watching me. I cant let them catch me. Always watching.

August 6

[illegible]

February, 20, The year of our Lord

My fellow Americans love me so much. All day long I can hear them talk about me. I can hear them whisper. I love my country. America the beautiful. America the brave. My hometown wasn't so far from here, I grew up with the most loving American mother, you would have loved her. I think i should be a spy. Those damn Celts over the Iron Wall have been nothing but trouble and I think I would make a great American Covert Legionnaire. I had a name once I think, some number or something

## ***The Life and Times of a Dead Man Walking – dizzyd93***

The Neo-Vikings never will take to us too well. They scream and spit at us, kick us in the mud and curse us in that ugly tongue of theirs. But that's only if you're lucky. I've seen vast shadows cast on the soot caked walls of alleys in passing; those of demons as they cut down a boy and stomp the life out of him. All for missteps or unintended eye contact, sometimes for no reason at all. And that's if you're a boy. You don't want to know what happens to the girls.. All we are to them are the menial cogs to their war machine. We make their guns, we cook their food, we are the fine print to a large contract on which we had our names forged. This used to be a proud Celtic town, for decades we hadn't changed our flags. Most of us hated the war back then, now we all do. Our victorious monuments have been either defaced or replaced. I pass Odin, Thor and Ull on the way to the shack myself and forty others call home; all false gods I would spurn if it didn't get me killed on sight. We are the voiceless majority of a town taken, the untouchable wasted, the walking dead



## ***Unfinished Business Part 1 – dizzyd93***

It was a cold and rainy day. The heavy nuclear mists had fallen to their home just above the swamp floor, casting a range of dense neon hues around the city's edge. The buildings were silent, but if they could they would scream. Their people had long left and gathered in the avenue, having pulled together what black clothes they owned and what little flowers still grew. Today was a day of mourning, not just in this city but in the all cities of Celtania. Arrenias Lycerius had been shot, the last blood relative of our great leader of long ago. A true blood representative of everything that was great in this world. The finest leader this country had had in centuries, and he was shot in his bed as he slept. No one was prepared for this tragedy, no one was prepared to burn the body of their Dignitary along with their dead sons, brothers and fathers being sent home in boxes from the front line. None seemed prepared, except Arrenias's advisor. He stood behind the podium in front of an ornate coffin, giving a eulogy that seemed too rehearsed. Wearing a suit that seemed too pressed and ready, with a look in his eyes that seemed too sincere. But no one in the crowd noticed. Heads were bowed, tears filling the cracks in the dry earth. The world was bereft of noise. Even the steady song of the front line guns seemed to hush and fade. But high above the solemn scene, perched on a windowsill sat a staunch soldier. A scarred visage of the best and worst parts of war. A warrior in all sense of the word. And she eyed the only one who spoke for miles through a high powered scope.

Her finger twitched. She had done this a million times, blown a hole the size of a Neo-Jeep through heads much further away than this. But the gut in her stomach, the one deep inside that tells you when you're about to die seemed to have a death grip hardline on her now trembling finger. She knew that if she sent a one way fuck you flight through this guy's headpiece, the flash from her silenced Ullr-12 .60 Caliber rifle would be all it took for the Security Task Force to lob a rocket that would vaporize the entire fifteenth floor of the building she stood in. And on top of that, she couldn't hurt these people anymore than they already were. They had already lost one leader, she couldn't be the one to kill their new one the same day. That was what was

killing her, killing her enough to want to kill him. How could this two faced son of a radroach be seated in the most powerful empire, how did he just waltz into all this power? She knew something was up and she was going to find out if it got her killed. That's when the artillery started falling.

Hours before, a gunfight at Border Saloon had left the cease fire irrelevant and Viking and American troops were closing in from both sides. It was no wonder the cackle and boom of front line artillery seemed quieter than usual; the gunners had their necks slit by recon men while they silently mourned for a lost father. The Iron Wall had been broken for the first time in a millennium, and with the brute force of Viking Tyr mobile artillery had fallen upon Celtic cities nation wide. People in the square fell to the ground as the very earth shook from the oncoming shells. Frightened police herded people underground into the dilapidated subway tunnels, the only semi-safe place when the bombs started to fall anymore. The advisor, it seemed, had a quicker route to a safer place as he was swept up by cool headed STF agents and hauled off in an APC. Our warrior got a birds eye view of the helpless citizens and hero cops to slow to make it to the subway get turned into craters as the hefty bombs hit the ground. Swinging her rifle up, she wasted a few rounds into the mixture of Viking and New American bombers who were too busy fighting each other to see the sonic blasts of her bullets barely inching by their planes. But she couldn't help but wonder why she wasn't dead yet. She was in the hotel, the tallest building in New Caledonia, and bombers always aim for tall buildings in cities anymore. But all fire from every direction was concentrated on the streets, as though they knew the people would be lined with them today. it was too fucking perfect, she thought. She had one round left in her rifle's magazine, and she knew damn well who it would get to say it's last goodbyes to.

It was hours before the devastation stopped. She knew she couldn't look out the window, there was no way the subway tunnels had held up to that much barrage and she had seen enough people splattered on the dirty wall of buildings for today. She made her way to way down to the basement, kissing her sister Kelly on the cheek and wishing her well on the way through the safe room to the transport tunnels. She knew Kelly would never die, the ghosts of the old hotel wouldn't let her. But if she wanted to have such luck, she had to hurry

through these dirty tunnels out of town and into the Deepmoore swamp before the pyro-teams swept the town.

Traversing the swamps was as much as a pain in the ass as it always was. Between the hordes of moor bugs, swamp rats that seemed bigger than last time she was here and nuclear fog so thick you couldn't cut it with a phasesaber, the swamps were a dangerous place even for mutants and scavengers who called it home. It wasn't til she came to the statue of Lucky Lucifer after hours of wading through neck high muck that she took a break and got to lay on semi-hard ground. Looking up, she saw New American supply planes flying toward New Caledonia. It was unsettling to see the Sioux and American flags occupying the side of one plane. Ever since American Covert Legionnaire spies subverted control of Sioux government, and integrated Sioux and American cities into New America, a new super power had emerged into the world. She had heard that there was even talk on the Viking front of how the new foe was a worthy if not unpredictably dangerous one. She picked her rifle back up, she knew she had more important things to think about. Like where that son of a botch advisor was going, and how she was going to get past what she assumed was going to be nothing but the most elite asshole guarding his ass. She had to find a friend and fast, with the war machine kicked into fifth gear and running in the red, she knew time was short. Just a few more miles of swampland left and she'd be in her hometown. And she knew just the part of her seedy, hellacious part of town she could find the type of friend she needed.

The small Of Old Beriso hadn't changed. The soot of the factory it's built around mixes with the smell of blood, sex and beer emanating from the bars in a way that would make a maggot gag. But for the people who call this place home, her being one of them, there's no better place to be. If you want some exotic form of drugs, guns or pussy, you go to Old Beriso. And if you're a fugee who doesn't want to love day by day in a city who hates you, mind your business in Old Beriso and you will never have a problem with the roaming Homeland Security paper checkers. The government knows better than to go past the walls there. There are people who know a bit too much about what really goes on in this world within them to want to go anywhere close. Here in Old Beriso the people were the government. These were exactly the people she needed, people with connections, the real

people in power in this country. She made her way past the stinking brothels and the crowds of children begging for food to that familiar bar. Girls danced on stage as men drooled into heavy mugs of beer. She knew she'd find him here, he was always here. She bought a bottle of bourbon and borrowed a couple shot glasses before making her way to the far end of the bar where the big lug always sat. Marv was the kind of guy you don't want to even look at you for fear he'd break your soul in half with a stare. He said he comes from a long line of men like him, warriors of the battlefield- brutal tanks of men, all the way from his great great great grandfather who he was named after. Unpredictably violent and ridiculously scarred. But if there was one thing she knew she could break him down with, it was the bourbon in her hand. Get him drunk and he'd be putty in her hands. "Long time you ugly fuck." Hell of a way to start a conversation, but it was the only way to pull his eyes off that beautiful girl in chaps onstage. He whirled around in his stool, an empty beer bottle at the ready to bust the skull of the asshole who called him out. A smile broke the road map of scars on his face as he recognized his old army buddy. A baker's dozen worth of shots later and she had the story she needed.

According to Marv, after the bombs fell, the advisor's APC was seen flying by on the Wrecked Roads toward the ferry to Aunios Island off the coast of Shoreside Vale. To make things worse, the New Americans and Vikings were pushing the lines back at a rate that would have them to Old Beriso by midnight. She had to get moving soon if she wanted to get to Aunios by nightfall, but at least she had some back-up now. He said he just had to talk make a few calls and they could take his Jeep down the coast. Twenty minutes later, after a tough time picking the correct arsenal for this type of assault, they were off. It would only be a matter of time before she could get her answers, and spend that last bullet she was saving.

## ***The Celtic Struggle: The Tale of an Engineer – Newlyfailedaccount***

Walking along the half constructed road along a misty trail of bogland stretching for endless miles, the job only gets tough. The pay is good while the risk is high, nothing better than being paid for work that insures your families survival from the slow death of starvation while at the same time, avoiding the fast death on the battlefield. The risk though...the risk still ends with death but unlike the guaranteed bullet through the hard cranium of the head penetrating into the soft mush of the brain on day one, this death remains one of uncertainty as road construction means working through sinking diseased ridden water. Even worst, the threat of nuclear attack from the pointy hats or from the Strips will ensure a quick death that doesn't even give enough dignity for your bodily remains to be buried as they wither away as radiated gray dust into the sky. Work has begun early this morning, the rations of sawdust bread and a brown liquid that's suppose to provide energy keeps the Celtic comrades at ease. A modified gray pickup truck moves backwards slowly behind the end of the freshly paved black road in order to deploy a crudely made draining device made from spare parts from the destroyed tanks of recent battles. Slowly yet surely, the draining process begins but this isn't enough to satisfy the overseer so as always, we begin to sink our brown caked boots into the soil and begin to dig away with rustled shovels and buckets. Our gray uniforms slowly turn brown as well and soon, only our yellow helmet with the red star continue to shine through the gloom of the green mist, brown soil, and gray uniforms and vehicles. The sweat begins to slowly grow from a trickle of the forehead to a flood that only comes to refill the swamp that we try to drain. It is only when we hear the sound of a booming jet engine from the distance did we all realize that work was over for today...and maybe for a very long time until the next crew finishes what we've started. Long live the glory of the Celtic Worker.

## ***The Return* – jsimpson82**

Mission log, IS-03 Hubbard

We began our journey millenia ago, a mission to a far away star. From our own perspective, it has been a little over two decades, and our mission is nearly complete. We are returning to an unknown Earth, and it appears, a darker one.

I have not yet told the crew what I believe, but I think it is time to summarize what I think I know. At present, only myself and the radio officer have any knowledge of current events. Something on Earth went seriously wrong in our absence. Actual communication disappeared less than a century, earth time, after launch. I believe now I understand why.

I will have to tell the crew, soon. I'm not sure how they'll take it. We can orbit for a while, but we have enough supplies for less than a year more ship-time. Once those are exhausted we must land... or starve.

## ***The Faceless, The Nameless – Ceurl***

The worst day of my life was the first day of my life. My life had no hope. No chance of reprieve or survival. As a male Viking child, there was only one path for my life to take; straight to the front line. From a young age, we were taught to be strong. Taught how to fight. Taught to have no fear, just undying loyalty to our nation.

Those who survived the frequent nuclear blasts were the unlucky ones. At the age of 15, you were moved into a fighting force. Moved to the front lines. By this age, you were able to command, drive and fire our tanks. You enter the tanks a thousand miles from the very front, which is then sealed shut, entirely self-sufficient. This became your home for the next few days. And eventually, your coffin.

The tanks were small, designed for two people. Designed for short time living only; the fundamental design hadn't changed in hundreds of years. Easy to manufacture. Could hold their own against American or Celtic forces. Just about. But their size; they could hold with a degree of comfort two people. They could be controlled by two people with years of skill and training. Over the years, the age of being sent to the front had steadily decreased, greener and greener soldiers being sent to the front. The amount of training received had, over the years, become less and less.

To amend this lack of training, the geniuses up the chain of command, decided that they could put three men in each tank. That this would be a sufficient substitute to years of training, testing and mental conditioning. They, unsurprisingly enough, were wrong. But nobody ever made it back, to tell of the idiocy of command's idea. When you get into that tank, you do not leave. You trundle along, if lucky, fire your main gun a few times. Then die. Obliterated by shell fire or nuclear blast.

The tank's interiors were sparse. There was a single bunk, very little room to manoeuvre if you are in by yourself. Let alone if you are sharing it with two boys, much the same as you, going off to die on the front. Cabin fever very quickly set in. Tempers would fray. The atmosphere inside that metal box deteriorated quickly, soon becoming almost as bad as the political atmosphere of the three nations. You would soon hate your two companions, with every bone in your body.

Only the ever present mile counter would keep you straight, constantly ticking off the miles travelled, counting towards your death.

Inside those boxes, the food was bad. The air stank, which, while rich in oxygen was almost overbearing with the chemical purifiers they added in to cycle the air. There was the risk of a leak from your fuel cells, which could easily poison all three of you. The food was prone to spoiling fast, and while nutritious, tasted bland and encouraged nausea. And the chemical toilet...don't get me started on the damned toilets. Overflowing faeces was the least of your worries with those toilets.

Your outcome was dismal, if you were male, and born of the Viking lines. No hope. No chance of survival. Do not ask how they continued our race. Do not ask what happened if you were born female. We were separated at a young age, us into military training. Them, who knows. Certainly none of us.

We were the unlucky ones. The ones whose lives would be thrown away. The ones with no names. The ones history will forget. For who is writing the history books? Certainly none of us. I am just another nameless Viking, dragged into the eternal war. I never asked for this. Never.

As I write this, we are fifty miles from the killing floor. A few hours, until our death. The other two are piloting this machine and keeping watch. To our left, another tank. To our right, another tank. In front of us, tanks. Behind us, tanks. As far as the eye can see; tanks. I lie cramped in the bunk, quickly penning this. But nobody will ever read it. There will be chance. For by nightfall, all of us will be dead, obliterated. This leaf of paper will cease to exist. It is unfair. And I wish it weren't so. But there is nothing I can do. Nothing I could ever do.

M.



## ***At the End of Everything – Ceurl***

For a thousand years we had been ignored. The superpowers fought amongst themselves, fighting on and on over small patches of lands; a war based around a petty feud. The cities on the borders swapped back and forth on almost a weekly basis, their names changed so many times nobody knew what they were originally called. Save us.

We had documented every step of this war. While they threw tanks at each other, we made notes. While the icecaps were melting, we observed from underground. While the nuclear weapons were falling, we observed from afar, considered an insignificant problem and thus not worthy of concern. While they struggled to feed their people and produce enough tanks to maintain their lines, we flourished on our small island and beneath it, in the tunnels and catacombs of our race. Ours was a race of scholars and scientists, of selective breeding and betterment of ourselves.

We had weapons, should we be attacked. Caches of nuclear missiles hidden around the world could be launched within minutes of an assault on our land. But none fell on our soil. For we were insignificant, mere mice in the scheme of all things. They fell into a constant routine, unable to progress technologically, unable to divert resources away from their constant production of military weapons. We however, could experiment. Our brightest and best were encouraged from a young age to pursue all hints of knowledge. Our race had a single purpose.

To survive. To rebuild.

Nothing lasts forever. While this war had gone on for about seventeen-hundred years, we had felt a stirring in the wind, in the grand scheme of things. Something was happening. The Celts had something up their sleeves; we just were unsure as to exactly what. This war was coming to an end. But when it did, who would rule in its place?

The Vikings? With their theocratic masters and militaristic worldview, they would be unfit to lead a planet in peacetime.

The Celts were little better. They tried to cling to their past beliefs, tried to believe that they were still civilised and modern, and modern

they may have been. Seventeen-hundred years ago. Now, they were little better than the Vikings, and certainly just as unfit to lead as they. What about the Americans? Around the twenty-first century they may have been powerful and dominant and influential, but they were hardly more civilised than the others now, they had been living under the rule of their Godkings for far too long. War was all that they knew, all that they would ever know.

No. We were the only choice when it came to peacetime. Our engineers would be able to remove the fallout from the continents. We could turn back the effects of global warming almost a thousand years. We knew how to run a country in peace time, how democracies worked, and how they failed. Thousands of years of history's mistakes sat in our grasp, fully documented, processed and understood. We still had records from about 2000BC; none of the others maintain records from a decade ago. We would not let the same mistakes be made.

Nobody else could rebuild this shattered world. They do not have the strength for it. War is all they know. Without the threat of war pushing them on, the others would fall apart entirely, exhausted entirely by the years of violence and death.

When the end of war comes, as is inevitable. When the last nuclear missile falls from the sky. When the last tank is produced. Do not look to the Americans, to the Celts, to the Vikings, to lead mankind onwards. Look instead to the small group of people, living on a small group of islands, who between them knew more than the others ever had done. The age of war is ending. The age of the Sioux, is upon us.

## ***Death from Below – Ceurl***

The city was in pieces. Dilapidated buildings lay in all directions, the shockwave from nearby nuclear detonations having shattered glass windows and destroyed the tops of the tallest buildings. Concrete blocks and scaffolds lay piled upon each other, hindering movement through the urban wilderness. The easiest way to travel was by air; small areas of the city had been flattened, enough that skilled Helo pilots could just about land them. Few people travelled by foot, the city was practically deserted. As such, it was an excellent location for the Celtic high command to keep their primary base of operations. As such, it was a high priority target for the DeVAS, America's highest, and most secretive, order of Assassins.

Nymere Alaine rolled out of her bedroll, immediately alert. Vibro-blade in one hand, pistol in the other she crept around the dilapidated building's basement she had commandeered for the night. She had been smuggled to the city outskirts inside the back of a modified supply truck and from there she had slowly picked her way through the ruins of the city. Alaine spun at a noise below her, gun readied and knife held defensively but it was only a cockroach the size of a small dog. She slowly lowered her arms, as the cockroach scuttled away from the torch slung underneath her pistol.

Checking her pocket-watch and determining it too late in the evening to return to sleep, she rolled up her bed roll and lashed it to her pack, which sat prepared by the side. Checking her weapons and slinging her hand-and-a-half sword across her back, she removed an MRE from a side pocket of her pack, before pulling it on, over the sword but with the hilt easily accessible. This done, Alaine shifted the debris she had piled behind the basement door and cautiously opened it up, listening intently for any sign of life. As it had been for the past week, the city was silent. No sounds at all; not the sound of machinery or human life, of animals or even the wind. Just a dead, uneasy silence.

Sneaking cautiously to the entrance of the building, she peered intently up and down the roads, but nothing had changed since the night before. After ten minutes in that doorway, she moved out into the road, staying close to the buildings and moving slowly enough to not be noticeable from the skies.

She had been smuggled to the outskirts of the city in the back of a truck heading further into Celt lands, with a month of supplies, a map, and her personal gear and weapons. The map was a rough city plan, but it was worth more than her life, it showed the location of the Celtic command post. Within it, she would find Lycerius. With him dead, the endless stalemate would break, the war could progress, America could take their rightful place as ruler of this fallout-covered planet.

Communications with the space pioneers, who had been launched almost two thousand years ago, could be re-established; not every race had severed all links to the past. A small sect of American scholars, living deep underground, had preserved a basic history of the world from before the war began and knowledge from those times which, while unintelligible to most, might one day be deciphered and of use.

After hours of treading cautiously through the city, just as the first rays of the sun pierced the smog filled skies, she spied in the distance her target. It was easy to recognise, for it had been the general hospital before the bombs fell and the large red cross was still visible, a hundred metres up in the air. With her objective located, she acquired herself a new building, quickly locating it's deepest part and barricading, as usual, the doorway and staircase down. Eating another ration pack, she laid out her bedroll, checked her weapons again before lying down and immediately falling asleep, into a restorative but light sleep, hands resting on her pistol and blade, as was her norm.

She awoke in the late evening, quickly consuming another ration pack, rechecking her weapons, and packing up her bedroll. Alaine pulled out the second document she had been given, this a schematic of the hospital, acquired during previous recon missions. She had been planning for the past week her best way of sneaking in, before settling on the sewer system. There were outlets on every street corner, as well as tunnels threading their way beneath the city including up to the sub-basement of the hospital. She exited her building on the far side, staying in the blind spot of the hospital, quickly locating a sewer entrance and flicking down her N-Vs before dropping down into the gloom, landing catlike and with weapons readied. The tunnel was empty apart from a thin layer of sludge at the bottom of the central channels.

Throwing caution to the wind, she moved down the tunnel at a quick jog, eager to cover the miles to the hospital; while it was maybe a hundred metres away, the sewer system had been built by a complete idiot, snaking around and taking extreme routes to get anywhere. An hour later, she slowed to her customary pace, as she was nearing the hospital.

Up ahead she could see the ladder that would get her inside, which she climbed up, cautiously and quietly, listening at the trapdoor above. Through it she could hear the slight noise that signified humanity; a quiet hum that accompanied humanity everywhere. But it wasn't nearby, so she pushed up the trapdoor and climbed into the room, which was full of pipes and junk, boxes stacked up almost to the ceiling with just a few pathways between. The Intel claimed that the command were located on the ground floor, the schematics implied she was two below that, in the sub-basement. The walls were a sterile white in colour, but had green tinges to them, mould, or rot; a thick layer of dust across the floor gave her confidence that this floor was uninhabited, rarely visited if at all.

Progressing through the maze of corridors and rooms, she came upon the main flight of stairs, but bypassed it, heading instead to an access shaft marked on the map, which originally ran all the way to the top of the building. Locating it, she climbed up silently, padded leather boots making not a sound on the iron ladder. She climbed up to the third floor, which was in a similar state to the sub-basement, with a thick coating of dust across the floor. She padded along to the staircase she had skipped over beforehand, clipping a cable to the handrail, preparing to drop down. In her hands, she held two canisters, one of knockout gas, the other a 'flash bang'. Descending down the cable to the ground floor, she saw lights on and people mulling about, but in the gloom of the stairwell she was as good as invisible.

She uncoupled herself from her cord, and in one smooth motion, threw the two grenades down the hallway before diving to the side, attaching her gas mask and covering her ears. Even with her hands over her ears, and her earplugs in, the loudness of the explosion threw her momentarily, before, regaining her focus, she flipped her N-Vs back down and plunged herself into the smoke-filled corridor. Moving quickly but cautiously, she took the moment needed to execute each figure lying unconscious on the floor; a shot to the head ending each

of them. Having memorised the floor plan from before, she threaded her way through the corridors, the range of the smoke astounding her despite her use of them previously.

At the end of the hallway, she saw a large conference room, now flooded with smoke and unconscious figures. Reloading her pistol as she hurried towards it, she shot the first few unconscious bodies through the head, before instinctively rolling to the ground and coming up with her vibro-blade drawn. A figure was looming over her, a blade in each hand, swinging them down towards her. She rolled again, this time underneath the large table and emerging from the other side, swung her gun around to point at the figure.

Before she could pull off a shot, the gun was knocked out of her hand by the flat of a sword, and it was all she could do to leap back, away from the swinging swords in front of her face. Pulling her own blade from its rear-scabbard, she backed steadily away from the figure moving towards her in the smog.

Observing his arms, she parried the next blow with her knife, before retorting with a backhanded slash, which was blocked by his left blade.

Alaine pressed in towards the figure, within the effective range of his swords, before kneeing him in the groin, and slashing him across the chest with her knife as he doubled over. As he fell, she smashed her other knee into his face, finishing by tearing out the man's throat with her sword.

She quickly recovered her gun, before hearing the most intimidating sound in the world behind her. The 'SHICK SHICK' of a shotgun being cocked, right behind her head. She let her weapons drop to the floor, willing to concede for this moment the advantage to her would be assailant, before turning around and gasping to herself, for in front of her stood Lycerius himself. But he did not look like the dashing military general in the photo she had of him. The left side of his face was melted, disfigured beyond repair. Holes in the flesh revealed the veins behind, she could see part of his brain through a gap above his eyeball. He was grinning too, a disgusting sight due to the hanging flesh and the missing teeth.

His eyes though. They were a vivid blue, full of clarity, full of insanity. And before she had a chance to make peace with her Gods, her head was blasted clean off. Nymere Alaine, daughter of Geran Alaine, died

instantly. Her mission, failed. The war, continued, unaffected by her attempt at Lycerius.

## ***The Old Ones – HellsJanitor***

I noticed a flash in the sky. Not uncommon, the SDIs shooting down another nuke. Quickly thanking the gods and the wisdom of the True Sons, I idly wondered why they sent them any more- no nuke had landed in a city of the True Ones in thousands of years. Probably to remind us they can.

A wave of whispered warning moved up the crowded yet silent street, jerking me back into reality. I hurriedly looked to the floor and murmured my prayers to the True Gods, and thanking their Sons for guiding us through the Eternal Conflict to our inevitable victory, as it must be against such heathens as the Americans with their Man God, their undying president, and worse still, the godless Celts.

As their chosen one walked among us, I was reminded of the day my son was chosen to bear the burden of leadership. He was merely a few days old. On the day of the Choosing, the thousands of babes born in the last month from the surrounding area of living space were gathered in a temple, and laid before the True Sons' gaze.

First, the betrayers and the liars, the tricksters and the thieves were rooted out and taken for culling. I was not worried at this point, as I knew no child of mine could be a vassal of The Trickster. After Loki's vile spawn were dealt with, a True Son stood before me and my child, still nameless, and gently lifted him from me.

A hunger pang again jolted me to the present. Maybe it was the nature of my journey that made me so unfocused today. Wiping away a tear of joy at the memory, I continued down the silent highway, with thousands yet alone, to the temple.

My hunger persisted, yet I ignored it, as always. The gods made sure we had enough to eat, yet the lazy and the infidels stole it from us, meaning everyone had to go without. The True Sons had it worst, going for months without food, so we were told by their spokespeople. They did it for us, and the time had come for me to do something back for them. For the greater good of everyone, to save the realm of the godly from the evil.

I entered the temple, struck by reverence for the Mighty Ones. I walked towards the Statue of Thor, hundreds of metres tall. His



hammer nearly touched the roof, held in position of great authority. Each god had his or her own statue, and each had different building at its base, dealing with each aspect of life. Odin and his raven dealt with Matters of state- only the True sons went there. Loki and his serpent's tongue dealt with traitors and spies. I myself had turned in many, I remembered with pride.

Thor and his hammer were for the glorious military. I knew my time had come to give everything for the gods. I would go into battle under their protection, and the many faced enemy would fall.

But suddenly, a great flash. It seemed to even leak through the very stone itself, it was so bright. I knew at once what had happened. The infidels had planted a nuclear device in the city. I felt a great rage course through my being that they would defile such a holy place, as suddenly the temple began to come crashing down around me. The statues fell slowly to the floor and as Thor's hammer came down, my final thoughts were that I would be in a better place, soon.

## ***Behind Enemy Lines and Waiting – thehouseofspike***

My name here is not important, the name that my parents gave me isn't important. (Call me Agent 22, if you'd like.) The only thing that's important is the mission.

How long have I been living behind enemy lines? Long enough that I don't remember what my actual home looks like. I can't see the faces of my real friends and family. I don't know if they are still alive. All I see are the smiling faces of the people around me: how I hate them. I am simply biding my time until I don't have to see their faces any more. Don't have to hear their voices, listen to their songs or gag when I hear them pray. Until then, I'm waiting. How much longer isn't for me to say.

For five years, as a member of the People's Security Force, I was on the Eastern Front and distinguished myself as a leader and a soldier. I killed hundreds of Vikings and 'Mericans in my time there. It was my duty and pleasure to protect our way of life. I didn't care about peace: I cared about my family and, of course, for Lycerius.

The Secret Police found my records and secured my transfer from the Lines to their ranks. I spent 10 years as a member of the SP and have learned a lot about our enemies: more than I care to know. I know how they speak, how they pray, how they make love, how they walk, eat and shit. I have become one of them: I've become an American.

For my mission, for my Supreme Commander, I have given up my love of Country and replaced it with foe-Patriotism. I now look at the Stars and Cross with as much love in my eye as is in my heart for the Red 'n Gold of my home land. I speak ill of the ones that I truly love and, at times have had to take the lives of my own Countrymen to prove myself. I hate it with all that I am but it is all for the greatest good: Victory.

I just have to wait.

Now, I find myself living and working close to one of their premier refineries. Here they take all of the scrap metal that they can salvage and recycle it into useable material. I have worked hard over the last 8 year here and they trust me. I fought along side with most of them,

when it was our time at the front or fighting off bands of raiding parties. I have saved some of their lives and they have saved mine. If only they knew who they were saving. What I was prepared to do with the life that they rescued. If only they knew that I was just biding me time. Positioning myself to the proper place on the game board and waiting for the signal to make my final move.

For Country, for my family. Long Live Lycerius!

## ***Ohio Frontier – Filthadelphia***215

With all the depopulation and destruction, I would think the game world would be a little more Fallout than 1984, at least on the edges of nations' where settlements are being constantly conquered and lost:

The caves are haunted.

He sat alone in the darkness, his heart still racing. The cool dank air had a pungent odor but his lungs screamed for it. He inhaled and exhaled rapidly, a hard rhythm like the muffled shuffle of the bare feet that had chased him. He knew they would not follow him here. Their fear was too great.

The caves are haunted.

There was protection here, in this labyrinth of concrete and steel. Even the screams above were muffled by the thick ceiling. They sounded faint and distant, though he knew he sat only a hundred feet and a few cracked, mossy steps away from the slaughter.

The Kelta would never follow him here, certain of his inevitable death in the caves. He was safe for a few hours until their raiding party moved on. Cinnati was a wasteland, a mountain of broken concrete, bent steel, and shattered bricks. The raiders would ravish their feminine spoils and offer the burnt flesh of the men to their god, Soshul. Inevitably, Soshul would go hungry as the raiders would use the charred flesh to satisfy their most pressing appetite. The Kernul (the cognomen used by all Kelta raiding chieftains who disavowed any other name on their ascendancy to that exalted station) would then mark a concrete slab with the knotted cords and cross of the Kelta, declaring Cinnati annexed by the Kelta Soshulist Republik. The raiders would then move on, probably south to the swampy hills of the Kentuck.

The caves are haunted.

The thought again crossed his mind as his breathing quieted and his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He could see thick, straight shapes ahead of him; a line of evenly-spaced robust guardians that held the ceiling in place for untold centuries. They stood burdened in tribute to the long-forgotten ancestors who had constructed the caves. For a moment, he wondered how strong the ancients must have been to

carve this voluminous cavern into the earth and place this line of Atlases to hold up the great weight of the mountain of Cinnati. Why would they build this, he wondered? Did the ancients flee to these tunnels when the sun god crumbled their 'towers to the sky' into the mound of Cinnati Mountain? What amazing relics of ancient hubris could he find in these caves, abandoned for centuries?

His people weren't primitive. Though they lived migratory lives, surviving off hunting and foraging through the remnants of destroyed cities, they were part of the proud Usa Confederation, heirs to the ancients. Though he had never gone further than the twin settlements of Indi and Apolis, he knew far to the west were great cities like Omaha, untouched by the ancient wrath of the sun god. When he was a child, he saw the might of the Confederation: giant silent beings, hairless metal skulls, only steely eyes peering through gas masks. Known as the 'Police' for their distinctive clear shields emblazoned with that name, they marched through Wrightpatt many years ago, a phalanx armed with an assortment of weapons from shovels to spears (railroad spikes attached to long lead pipes).

Intimidation was their strength. The Confederation Police were bogeymen to enemies and Usa citizens alike. While the Kelta raiders armored themselves with random scavenged pieces of metal, the Police wore the equipment of the ancients. While their hulking vehicles and rifles had fallen into disuse several decades before with the paucity of fuel and viable ammunition, their millennia-old masks, shields, and armor remained in pristine condition; a testament to the Confederation's status as heir to the ancients.

But there were no Police here to kill the hated Kelta raiders who pillaged above. They had not been seen in the Ohio for over two decades, despite repeated Kelta intrusions. Many believed that the sun god had returned after centuries and snuffed out Omaha in a flash of light, as he had done ancient Cinnati. The Confederation did not exist, they said, and the known world would descend into the savagery and barbarity of the Kelta Soshulists.

The caves are haunted.

His subconscious repeated the fearful mantra as he sat alone in the darkness. He dared not venture into the dank abyss, superstition eclipsing his curiosity. The cave was silent now, as not even the

savages above could be heard. He wondered if they would notice his small frame running to safety amid the concrete slabs above. He couldn't stay down here much longer. The caves are haunted.

He touched his wet brow, noticing his hand trembling. His eyes darted from column to column, wary of a creature emerging from behind the concrete. The caves are haunted. He stood as his heart raced. The caves are haunted. He turned to the cave's entrance, a few dozen feet away. Surely the Kelta would not be monitoring the entrance. There is no sense in remaining in this cursed cave. The caves are haunted.

He darted for the entrance, tripping over the broken steps. As a sting of pain crossed his face and blood entered his mouth, he hobbled into the bright light above. He knew the Kelta heard him. He knew the Kelta were picking up their weapons. He could hear the rattle of their armor and the shuffle of their bare feet. He ran. The caves are haunted.

Thanks

# ***The Wastes – HellsSniper***

Year: 3391 A.D.

Location: Five miles from the Front Lines

The convoy moved forward, flying the flag of the Celtics, creeping through the savage swamps. 1700 years ago the swamp was a place of beauty; trees growing, the wind flying children's kites. But now, their bones belong to the swamp, the trees belong to the wasteland. That was common around here, the front lines, "the wastes," and "the wasteland." It was the words that have spread since the first nuke went out.

*As I said earlier, that was 1700 years ago. And now, a war rages on between the only three superpowers yet, America, Celts, and the Vikings. Every country had a starving population, spies, and the occasional uprising. A stalemate, an "Eternal War" as it started to be called a few hundred years ago. However, let's get back to the convoy.*

The convoy crept across the swamps, eagerly approaching the front lines to reinforce their comrades. *Ah, yes, the Celts were a communist state.* Every man and tank moved at the same pace, none risking stopping in the irradiated swamps. That's when the explosion hit. Three tanks went into the air, the men ran, and the other four dozen tanks drove into the swamps. The men were scattered, shooting wildly. *An ambush set up by the Vikings, their fifth attempt to overtake the Celtics after a peace treaty was signed.* The soldiers scattered hiding in any type of cover they could find. Not much when traveling through the swamps. The tanks began to go up in fiery explosions, killing another dozen men with each tank gone. Limbs flew everywhere, and the little water there was in the swamp began to overflow with blood. And the Vikings were still nowhere to be seen.

*That's when they saw the flag.* The Viking soldiers flew over the swampy hills, hitting the tanks with grenades, and firing thousands of rounds into the soldiers. They blocked off all exits, swarming them from every side. There was no escape for the Celtics, and everyone knew that. They began to regroup near the middle of the swamp, occasionally throwing out green smoke into the Viking lines. The tanks surrounded the Celtic men, only four hundred of the original 1500 man

army. Two dozen tanks were left and began to rapidly fire at the charging Vikings, bodies flying every which way, blood scattering the hillsides.

The faint sound of helicopters approached the battlefield. The Vikings looked upwards, to see the Celtic copters. A few dozen of them who started to fire their missiles. Napalm lit up the swamp, devouring every Viking in its path. *Napalm was a very expensive weapon in 3391, only used in dire situations.* Then, the HUD on every single soldier's screen lit up. It displayed one word: RETREAT.

That meant one thing; a nuclear missile was yet again launched on the "wastes." No one cared about sides, no one cared about the napalm, and everyone just ran. The copters immediately turned back to the Celtic side, and the soldiers began to run in every direction. The "wastes" had no SDI, no shield against the missiles. No hope for any men left out there.

The nuke struck the ground, devouring every man, tank, and copter in the path. The men were disintegrated into nothing. The tanks exploded, and the copters crash landing every which way from the EMP blast. No soldier was left. No flag was seen. Only the bodies and machinery was still there, and they would be taken by the swamp, just as the others were.



## ***God Bless America* – compjunkie888**

Today is a great day for our great empire! Today marks the beginning of the end of this war! As we speak our spies are setting the charges across the cities of our enemies that will bring about their destruction. Our armies march across the swamps, through the barren wasteland, and sail across the toxic waters of this world in a final push toward victory! We will see the Celts and the Vikings destroyed this day. Since the beginning of time, our great ancestors who settled this land and established our once great capital of Washington D.C. it has been our right, our hope, our destiny from God to unite and bring peace to all peoples of this world and today that destiny will come to pass. We have been guided by God Almighty in his wonderful wisdom to this great victory and it is upon us! Stand with me today as our anthem is played and pray for our troops who march toward victory at this very moment. [1] [God Bless America](#)

## ***Dead Cold Days – Skittnator***

It was cold. Only it wasn't just cold, at least, not the cold that we we're used to. The world had gone to hell and back and then died in a hole in the backyard of a butcher shop rotting, molding, and festering. They had told us that the nuclear war the other nations had started is what caused it to be so cold, that the nuclear clouds that blot out the sun everyday is their fault, but I knew better. My father had told me what his father had told him, that all the nations were responsible, that we were at in a 'stalemate', that no one could win. Our government always seemed big and powerful in my eyes, if not evil. Every third day they come to our village for recruits, to fight the "Eternal War." My brother was taken, about three years ago, every since then my father hides me and my little brother in the basement, evading the recruiters and government thugs. It was even colder there, in the basement. Around our village people would call cold days like this "Dead Cold Days," a few people, usually older people or young children would die. They say dieing of the Dead Cold is one of the most peaceful ways to go, like falling asleep.

Food was scarce, few of us would ever feel full. To feed our family my father took to hunting, but the game he brought back was few and far between. When he does find game he more often sells it to the others in the village, or on rare occasion to the military men who patrol by. Sometimes I wonder how things are in the other nations, whether they too have so little as we, if they have to scavenge and sell to the military to get by, whether they have their brother's taken away.

"We're better off than most," my father always says when my brother and I complain of hunger or cold. We live in a windy farm house on the edge of the town with a backyard facing the vast frozen tundra that looks as if it goes on for miles. The wood that makes up the house looks grey and distressed, barely able to hold up the second floor, although we never go up the stairs for fear it will fail to do just that. All the buildings are made of this wood, I've never seen new wood, my father has told me that it isn't gray but a light brown or tan color, sturdy and structured, he says it reminds him of life, I wish I could see it.

On Dead Cold days my family sleeps in the common room with the fire, otherwise we surely would freeze to death. We don't dare burn wood, no one does, its too valuable to burn for heat, instead we burn livestock chips. The smell is bad, but the warmth far outweighs the smell. I enjoy watching the flicker of the fire against the wall, it reminds me of the televisions that the cities have, only dimmer, it calms me and takes me mind from the cold and hunger. Tomorrow is another recruitment day and we have to wake up early to take refuge in the basement, hopefully the Dead Cold will be gone by then. Although we can't count that we will eat everyday, we can count on the consistency of recruitment days and the Dead Cold days. I guess in a way its comforting, being able to count on something happening. Even if half the village dies of the Dead Cold I'm sure that they would still come looking for recruits to take away, they never forget to come, they always come.

## ***To Know Peace – Fogfun***

This is it.

This is how I die.

Staring down the barrel of a gun, into the shadows where my fate lays waiting. I can't say I've seen anything darker than the chamber of that gun. I've peered up into the inky night sky, wondering if tomorrow would bring with it some form of sustenance. I've stared into the pitch black swamps, listening to the sounds of gunshots in the distance, wrapping my jacket tighter around myself in a pathetic attempt to keep warm. And yet neither of those things are as unnerving as the sight before my eyes.

I remember the first time I saw the war. I had lived in a world that centered solely upon this endless turmoil for seventeen years, but I had never seen the actual devastation up until that point. It came in the form of a massive explosion that uprooted buildings and flattened trees. I think they said the final death count was just over one hundred. I don't know to be honest – I left the outskirts of the city that day, deciding that it would be safer to try and live off the land than to live hunkered down in a crumbling cement jungle, waiting for the day I died.

A second nuclear bomb went off a few days later, demolishing the place I had called home.

I remember the day my daughter was born. I stood over my wife, holding her hand, watching as her face contorted in agony. There was a woman at the other end of the table – a 'doctor' – who was trying to get the baby free. Something was wrong though... There was blood. So much blood. *Too* much blood. I kept wondering how someone could lose that much blood and still be breathing. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I was losing her – that it was very likely she would never be able to see her own daughter. But I held on to her, told her that we would raise our child together, that we would protect her from the terrors of this world. That we would be happy.

She died less than an hour later.

I remember the first time I killed a man. For food, no less. He was crouched over a small fire, scooping little handfuls of an unidentifiable

mush into his mouth. I had snuck up behind him and was prepared to attack when he turned around. I tackled him to the ground and we struggled a bit. I managed to get on top though, and without hesitation I began to pound the dull letter opener into his chest, over and over like some macabre imitation of CPR. His arms finally went limp, and I greedily scooped up the can, intending to bring it back to my daughter. When I arrived back at our little camp, I handed her the can, and she wordlessly took it. Her eyes remained fixed on the ground the whole time though, and she didn't take any bites. I knew that she knew. I took the can from her, placing it off to the side, holding her close as she sobbed into my shoulder.

We went hungry that night.

I remember the night my daughter died. Pressing my body up against hers, trying to keep her warm. I remember her meager voice asking me if we could make the fire a little brighter, a little warmer. I hushed her, telling her that I would keep her warm, that she would be ok. More gunshots rang out in the distance, and I was forced to further dim the flames. When she didn't answer me the next morning, I knew I had lost her too. Whether it was from the cold or the toxic air or the unending hunger didn't matter. She was gone. I dug a shallow grave and held a short vigil. Then I was gone.

I can't remember if I cried or not.

I once asked my father if this war would ever come to an end. He didn't answer me at first, and I had assumed that the long period of silence was his way of telling me that he didn't know. After a while though, he cleared his throat and began to speak. "All wars come to an end son. One day, in your lifetime, this one will too. It could be tomorrow. It could be in a year. It could be in twenty. One day though, you will know peace."

At the time, I had thought he was merely trying to keep my spirits from falling further than they already had. Now though, twenty-six years later, lying on a dusty patch of earth in an endless marsh, I finally realize what he really meant.

There's a brief flash.

I think this is what peace feels like.

## ***An Inside Job Part 1 – empath75***

"You know that none of this matters."

I paused one second to look at the old man, with his scraggly beard and wild eyes. One look at him, and you could tell he was off his meds. I said nothing, and spooned some gruel into his bowl.

"This whole world." He grabbed my shirt sleeve. "An illusion. A prison."

Oh, one of those. A fanatic. I was surprised that he was able to walk around freely. Just a matter of time before the ministry caught up to him.

"Sir, please move on, you're holding up the line."

He pulled me close. His breath nearly made me gag. "I know who you are." He whispered. My heart started racing.

The line behind him started getting unruly. He was getting pushed around but still holding on to my shirt. "I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean," I said, as calmly as I could. I saw ministry agents moving in. It always amazed me how they just seemed to appear out of nowhere. You never see them just standing around. They seemed to only be seen when they wanted to.

"DECEIVER!" he yelled as he was being pulled back into the crowd. I tipped over a pot of gruel, spilling it onto a few people who had pushed to the front of the line. By the time I looked back up, the fanatic was gone.

He couldn't have known my purpose for being Edinburgh, I thought, but it didn't feel like a particularly convincing thought.

Once we ran out of food, I ran out the back entrance before any riots could start. The tear gas and sound weapons started being deployed just as the automatic doors closed behind me. In the leader's infinite mercy, the Ministry of Order always deployed non-lethal crowd control techniques, designed to minimize the suffering of the people who unfortunately were unable to receive their allotment of rations. It usually took very little time for the crowds to disperse, because the people recognized the futility of asking for more than their fair share.

I was pretty shaken up after the encounter with the religious zealot, so I stepped into a pharmacy booth on the way home. A quick scan of my

vitals and a couple of questions, and out popped a handful of pills a few moments later, which I promptly swallowed. There were never shortages of meds, only food, for some reason.

As I waited by the street for my ride, a warm chemical rush flowed through me, and I could barely remember what I had been so upset about.

"They say the war is going to be over soon." Maura had snuck up behind me.

"They've been saying that for what, 1000 years now?"

"Brian, be careful about that. The war has ended before."

"Of course it has. For a year, maybe. And then, always, another..." I lowered my voice. "...bomb"

"The car is over this way," she said, and we started walking. "Anyway, you saw the parade. So many tanks made this year. I don't know how they can stop us."

"A tank isn't going to do anything when you can just walk a bomb into the middle of a city."

"You know they can't do that again. All the new security measures. You can't even take a piss without a camera watching you."

I nervously looked up and scanned for them. "I know, and I'm thankful for it," I said. "Let's just hope for they're right this time. About the war ending."

As we sat in the car, I nervously held my right arm. Just a few more days, and the cargo that had been formed into the shape of the bones they replaced might make the news stories right, but not in the way they expected.

--to be continued.

## ***Untitled Story – hopeiswiththeproles***

The Northstar facility was built deep into the edge of the Rocky Mountains, on top of a natural hot springs. It had been built originally by the United States Military, as a 'final contingency' disaster refuge. It was never intended to be a fallout shelter, per se, but had been created with the goals of long-term survival in mind. The structures walls, at their thickest, were perhaps 5 feet thick (this is only an estimate, as the original specifications have long since been lost). With living space for around 500 support staff, a small hydroponics lab, and storage for food, water and equipment, as well as self-maintaining solar collectors placed off-site, Northstar was geared to operate autonomously for 50 years, at minimum. It had far outlasted expectations, though most of its original occupants were long ago gone. The barracks were spread throughout the facility, always on out-facing walls, to best utilize the natural heat the hot springs provided. He woke as he usually did, to the faint smell of sulfur wafting into his dreams. The fourth shift alarm was buzzing its electronic noise throughout the complex, reminding late risers that it was time for their duty shift. He opened one eye first, then the other, adjusting slowly to consciousness in the poorly lit room. Things came into focus as he pondered if it was really possible that he'd actually slept his usual 7 hours. One had no true way of knowing how much time had passed unless you were in the heart of the building, at the Command and Control Center (CCC), where computers monitored the solar arrays, water flow and air filtration, as well as provided basic CCTV coverage. Today was one of the days Gregor wondered if perhaps the Generals were slowly shortening the time between shifts, minute by minute, day by day. With a groan he rolled himself out of his bunk and placed his feet on the warm concrete. He wiggled his toes as he tried to shake the grogginess from his head. Definitely feeling less than ideal. His duty shift was the last of the day, so it should have been around 1600 hours. It felt like it was 0600, judging by how well-rested he felt. The alarm was still buzzing, set by default to blare for 180 seconds before shutting off. It did not make the hangover easier. After his shift the evening prior, His fellow Northerners in hydroponics had invited him to the labs where they were testing the first run of vodka they'd distilled in perhaps 12 months. A more



experienced man might have known it to be vile stuff, but Gregor, at a youthful nineteen years old, hadn't known what he was getting into. Mixed with heavily watered juice, it had hit him pretty hard. He didn't remember climbing into bed the morning previous, but he shamefully recalled throwing himself at the nearest floor drain in the middle of his conversation with Julia, the pretty tech from the sci-tech division, his body trying to rid itself of the high proof liquor via the quickest means possible. He doubted he could recover his dignity after such failure. The alarm finally ceased, and in its absence a dull throb echoed through his head. Groaning once again, he rose shakily and crossed to two steps to his standing locker, and drew his jumpsuit from its hanger. He stopped to glance briefly at the photo of his father, a wrinkled and fading piece of paper on his locker door. He touched the photo with the knuckles of his hand, then closed the door. He went to the locker under his bunk, and pulled out fresh underwear, arguably the nicest item of clothing he owned, made of a synthetic material that only recently the science division had re-discovered how to synthesize. Unbathed but dressed, he took a deep breath, and drew the curtain across his doorway, and stepped out into his world. Half-lit fluorescent tube lights illuminated the dingy hallway in either direction, slowly curving out of sight. Winter was power rationing season. The Northstar facility had to rely mostly on geothermal heat, which fortunately was relatively reliable, if not plentiful. As he had for the past 6 years, he made a right out his doorway and strode down the hall. After about 5 minutes he reached a vertical ladder, leading to a thick metal hatch similar to one that might be found on an old armored vehicle or submarine. He drew a small ball peen hammer from one of the many pockets in his olive drab suit, and rapped it against the door, wincing as the sound reverberated through his head. A moment later the sound of a wheel being turned emanated from the hunk of steel, and it swung open with a well-oiled whisper. A shock of red hair appeared at the opening first, followed by a pale, slightly underfed looking face. Siobhan would have been beautiful, in other circumstances. Several years of gradual malnutrition had turned a lovely girl into a tired-looking woman. She grinned. "Hallo, Greg, I hope you're feeling right chipper this morning?" she put on a drunken-sounding Irish accent, as best she could imitate. She always argued she had the right since her ancestry was mostly of Gaelic descent. Gregor groaned yet again in

response. 'Well that's a bloody good thing. The boys up top brought us down a lovely stack of work' She pointed to a hatch in the ceiling similar to the one in the floor. 'Unsurprisingly, SCARs don't take kindly to being humped around in the rain, tossed in the mud and then frozen! Imagine that.' (one more groan) 'Thus, we have the oh-so-glorious task of taking care of these poor, misused tools of destruction.' A wicked smile spread across her face, and without warning a roll-up of canvas full of tools hurtled towards Gregor just as he dismounted the ladder. He sloppily caught it before it struck him in the face. 'What's got you all excited?' In his beleaguered state, his inherited east-bloc accent made itself known. "I've had stims and you haven't! And I'm definitely not hungover, but you are! In any case, we have guns to take apart. There's some water and some stims on the bench, rookie!" She waved her arm vaguely toward a corner of the cramped room, where a work bench was cluttered with various tools and weapon components, leaving only room room for one person to uncomfortably sit on the edge. A tall bottle and two small white tablets sat in the center of that space. The smithy, as it was called, had little to do with its historic counterpart. The room was perhaps 15 feet by 40 feet, and every possible surface was covered in weapons in various states of disrepair. Assault rifles of every manufacture lined one wall. A pile of half-assembled Light Machine Guns lay in a corner. Pistols ranging from autos with CPU controlled sights to early 1900's revolvers were neatly arranged in partially open drawers under the work station in the center of the room. And in the other corner, several grenade launchers of typical US Military heritage sat carefully disassembled. In the table in the middle of the room, 8 SCARs lay lazily piled, caked in mud, with rust showing in odd spots. It was a sad sight. He grimaced at that, and moved for the pills. Taking the bottle in hand, he tossed the pills back, and took a draught of the filtered ground water, draining half the container in one pull. A breathe, and then the bottle was empty. Better. Bottle slammed back down on the counter. "Fucking commandos. They yell about being able to tack a man at 300 yards with any weapon they're handed, but they can't even be troubled to keep a gun clean. No respect." Even as he spoke, though, he was straightening up the work area, grabbing tools from the various corners of the room, and organizing them in an orderly fashion. 'If ever I was taken with them on one of their research

parties, I would pistol-whip every man I caught leaving his rifle in the mud.' Organization complete, he picked up the rifle nearest him in the stack. Siobhan did the same, listening as her standard wry smile remained fixed upon her face. Gregor paused his near-daily rant as he attempted to strip the weapon. He gave a tug at the loading mechanism. Nothing. Next, he depressed the magazine release and gave the magazine a firm tug. Nothing budged. He held the gun before him for a moment, regarding it as one might regard a complicated jigsaw puzzle. Apparently giving up, the gun was calmly set back on the bench, followed by a loud oath in Russian, a language Gregor would never speak as well as his father or grandfather had, but from which he could curse better than most men. Siobhan chuckled, and handed him a strap of rolled up leather. He nodded his thanks, and opened it to reveal an assortment of pin punches. He selected the appropriate item, drew his peen hammer from his pocket, and went to work on the gummed up mechanisms of the poor rifle.

## ***Eulogy – okcodex***

"The Eternal War denies our right to die with dignity."

The words were crudely craved into the back wall of the lobby of - what used to be - a hotel. Colonel Bradley and I had been holed up in the ex-lobby for hours, guns clutched to our chests, huddled for warmth behind an overturned desk.

We stared at the wall for the entirety of our time spent there, mentally poking them, prodding them, weighing them, studying them for meaning, both overt and symbolic. The words made a strange kind of sense to us, though we weren't sure why. I liked to pretend that people who lived before the war, as I had not, had the freedom to choose their own deaths. Perhaps one day, people woke up and thought, "This is a fine day to die. I have always loved sailing, perhaps I will drown." This depressed me, but it also comforted me in a way. It was almost like a promise that if I could find a way to end the conflict, I, too, could choose my death. I thought about the death that I would choose, but it was difficult to think of a death of any kind aside from war. I thought about the death the writer of the words would have chosen.

Then I thought about the death he actually chose. He had carved the words into the wall with the butt of his gun, snapping the thing in two as he finished. He must have felt some kind of freedom, some sort of acceptance, as his next move could only have been to hold out his arms out and await his end, his corpse eventually landing not four feet from us, where the bones still laid.

His words, and his death, and the strange way in which he chose it, served as a eulogy for all those who fell after him, including me, whether I lived to see the end of the war or not. I was changed.

I looked at Colonel Bradley, and he smiled back at me. It was a knowing smile. His thoughts must have mirrored mine. He inhaled a breath, paused a moment, and began to speak, uttering a single syllable of an unintelligible word before a disgusting SLAP sound stopped him short, and the side of his face exploded away from the rest, splattering against the wall.

Colonel Bradley, too, had been robbed of his right to die with dignity.

I, on the other hand, was far too preoccupied with another matter:  
Had he been targetted, or was the bullet a stray?

# ***The Hotel at the End of the World –*** **pearlysoames**

## **Chapter 1**

The older, olive-skinned woman had an endearing and sharp way of speaking that a particularly loud and well-traveled soldier would later say was a cross between an American's drawl and a Celt's lilt. "It's not a war baby. In wars there's a winner. This is life. This is how men are. Ever since the first long twilight, this is how it's been for us here. Celt men fight. American men fight. Viking men fight. Men drop bombs. Men fight each other for what they want regardless of whether it's right or wrong. Some women fight too. But we don't. It's been almost three weeks now and the flag on the front of the house has the Lycerian seal on it. You seen it? Well, a month before that it was the Stars and Stripes. A few weeks before that the Lycerian seal. Then before that the hammer and horn. Who knows what it'll be tomorrow? I saw you lookin out the window. I saw you talkin to Colleen. I even saw the way you used to look at that one Viking boy who was here. Then the Celts came. You can't be so stupid Cassi. You've got to be strong baby girl. We are women and this is the way the world is. Men come to New Caledonia for two things. The first is to fight. We are at the end of the world. The smarter you are, the more civilized you are, the farther you are from the fighting. We are smack dab in the middle, so it doesn't really matter where civilization is but it's not here. The war will never end, but that doesn't mean that they don't try. To the old men with fresh food and small arms, trying," she paused to sigh, "is sending a batch of young boys to kill another batch of young boys and string up your flag in New Caledonia. There is a constant parade of poor, stupid boys coming through here alternately high on pride when they take New Caledonia and then crippled by fear when they know their time is coming. This brings me to the second reason men come to New Caledonia. Have you ever been with a man before?"

Cassi had just been moved to the hotel a week ago. She didn't realize that Mama Kelly had seen her looking at the Viking boy but now she knew she'd only seen her looking at him. She felt her cheeks flush as she remembered Stephen's smile, the tattoos on his bare chest, then

the scar from a bullet on his inner left thigh. "No," she told Mama Kelly, seething on the inside. She wondered what Colleen had told Mama Kelly. Cassi thought she could trust her. She wondered who else knew about the Vikings.

Mama Kelly laughed, mistaking Cassi's flush for embarrassment at having never been with a man. "My grandfather was an American who lived to be 27. My father was a Viking who lived to be 24. My grandmother and mother were both Celts. They both lived past 70. The world is cruel and won't give you anything. You have to take what you can get and stay out of the way of desperate men if you ever want to make a life for yourself. Desperate men only want to fight and fuck. They come to New Caledonia to fight. They come to the hotel for everything else. If you're not going to be giving everything you have lying on your stomach out in the mud, you might as well enjoy giving everything you have lying on your back for the men who come to New Caledonia to die."

Mama Kelly dropped her brow and looked straight at Cassi, waiting for her to break gaze, but Cassi didn't break.

Cassi's mother had died before she could remember. Her father was killed by Americans because he didn't have enough hygiene paper to give them. She was nine at the time. She had spent almost a decade living in the kitchen at the barracks mess hall. She slept on the floor with her best friend Ciaran. They got to eat leftover scraps in exchange for cooking for whatever regiment had commandeered the New Caledonia barracks. About a month ago some Vikings had seen her and Ciaran sleeping on the floor, pressed up against one another's contours to keep warm. She had never gotten attention from the men before but something about that night put a terrifying glaze over their eyes. They pulled her up from where she lay and threw her on one of the steel tables, violently stripping her from the waist down. She kicked and screamed but they hit her in the jaw. Ciaran had disappeared from where he lay after they stomped him into a bloody mess on the floor. She thought she was saved when a siren went off and the earth shook like a bomb had been dropped, but the three Vikings only laughed it off. One of them stood over her and leaned down, licking the side of her face where she'd been punched. He pulled himself out of his pants and pulled on himself, getting longer and wider. This was the first one Cassi had ever seen. When he put an arm

down beside her head and went to push in she heard a series of loud cracks and he fell on her, his blood dripping into her eyes. Suddenly both Vikings holding her arms let go and she pushed the first Viking off as fast as she could and ran forward, to see Ciaran, supporting himself against a wall wielding a Viking gun. She collapsed on the floor and put her arms around Ciaran's legs, sobbing in relief. He began to sob too. They were both crying when they heard the doors fly open.

Cassi looked up at him just in time to see a look of naïve relief flash across his face, "Hey!" he said, waving his arms with the gun. In only the time it took Cassi to pull down on Ciaran to keep him safe, the Celt foot soldier looked at the young man, battered and bloodied with a Viking gun, and the Celt girl, half naked on the floor with a bruised face, and drew the conclusion that most soldiers would draw. Before Cassi's pull even brought Ciaran to the floor the Celt took aim, fired, and inadvertently made sure that Cassi would not have anyone to watch over her ever again.

The Americans took her father. The Vikings took her innocence. The Celts took Ciaran. Men only want to fight and fuck. They killed everything she loved. If she couldn't get out of their way she might as well get paid for being in it. "I can take it," she said to Mama Kelly.

Mama Kelly knew her story already because she knew every girl at the hotel's story. They were all various hues of the same blood red.

Nothing shocked her any more. Nothing shocked anyone anymore.

New Caledonia is the ninth circle of the hell that is the eternal war.

"Alright then. Come with me baby. I want you to meet somebody."

## **Chapter 2**

"Ah'm not one a them!" The man was still hard. His fat, sweaty paunch with muddy beads of sweat was rising and falling to the cadence of his rice wine stained breath. "That banner out front don't mean shit to me. Ahm hurr for somethin more `portant than arms and flags."

The young, barely pubescent girl on the bed cowered and pulled the sullied quilt over her when Mama Kelly gestured at her with the gun, "I can see that you're here for something else."

"Ahm hurr on some `portant orders."

"You're all here on orders."



"No, Ahm hurr on orders from somebody don't lose no money when tha Beards nuke a swamp, somebody don't cry when the Yanks bomb a marsh, somebody don't even wince when Micks come through takin liberties with tha women and children. Ah got mahself a bigger swamp ta fill than New Caledonia."

A ripple of bemusement went from the tip of Mama Kelly's oversized gun all the way down to her ironically elegant rabbit-fur slippers. She shifted her weight then the sweaty man stayed aroused as he watched her adjust the threadbare robe wrapped around her curvy body, and then sit in the stool where desperate girls would fellate moribund soldiers. He watched the way her curves flowed over the edge of the stool, and imagined what it would be like to leave a red handprint on the haunches that had been groped by a thousand cold-blooded killers. Mama Kelly noticed he was reaching for himself.

"Well, I'm going to assume that you're either simple, you've had some guns pointed at you before, or both." Mama Kelly pointed her gun at the man who quickly put his hand back at his side.

"Yes'm, Ahm rather simple. Ah have but one design."

"What kinda idiot would send another fat idiot with a penchant for white tigers to the front line?"

"Ah didn't ask for her, and I don't ask for 'em hairless. She was all was ready when Ah got in."

"Where's your insignia?"

"Ah told ya, Ah didn't come in with tha Micks. Ah don't have insignia."

"Check him." Mama Kelly motioned with one of the long, immaculately manicured fingers on her left hand. A svelte blonde girl with rags wrapped around her body surveyed the sweaty man. She cautiously edged around behind him gripping a long machete blade with cloth wrapped around where a handle had once been.

"Nothing," she said. Mama Kelly shifted her weight again.

"You're here on orders with no ink?" The hotel siren went off and against a series of loud booms punctuated by machine gunfire.

"Americans this time."

"Ah'll be safe with tha Americans," the man said in an unsettlingly casual tone, "they respect a man of the cloth."

Anger lit up Mama Kelly's face. "Shit! What're your orders?"

"Ta fill these swamps and leave solid ground for the second coming of Christ, insha allah."

"You're a Third Twilighter."

"Ah know no creeds and books. Ah'm sent from God."

There was a long silence. The two stared at one another in a deadlock. Mama Kelly had told Cassi that you can really see who a person is in their eyes. Cassi watched as Mama Kelly's eyes bore into the man. Still naked, he now hung limp, covered in sweat that had mixed with the dust caked to his body. He was no stranger to piercing stares, fearful stares, or even thousand-yard stares. His head had been shaved within the month, most likely forcibly as evidenced by a few half-healed scars on his ears. He had a lazy eye, but there was still something powerful and even captivating about his gaze. His pupils were dilated on account of the dim lighting in the room, his irises were bright blue but had a slight slant down on account of his mixed American blood, and over it all his eyes were deadened with the unmistakable glaze that belongs to a man who has been witness and party to things that make one cease looking too deeply into the world around him.

"Where's God?" The girl with the blade said.

Without breaking gaze, Mama Kelly coolly answered, "God doesn't exist anywhere you and I will ever go Cassi."

"That's jus not true. God is errywhere and in errythin." The sweaty man interjected.

"It's not a place," Cassi said, confirming her new understanding of God.

"It's not a thing," Mama Kelly snapped, looking at Cassi, "and you'd be best to forget the word now. To survive you need to stay full, warm, and dry. Anyone who's aiming for something beyond the swamp is not long for this world." She turned to the sweaty man, "what I want to know is how a Twilighter got in with the Celts. They don't play your games or sing your songs and they sure as shit don't need a blessing."

"Ah've got a trade. Ah'm a fisher."

"Bullshit. We don't believe in your magic here. Nobody comes up from the swamp with anything but scars and poisoning, if they come up at all. Plus we don't keep men around here. They come and go but if

we've got anyone big enough to hold a gun that they don't want to lay with, the soldiers would take it as harboring the enemy."

"Check mah bag."

Mama Kelly spotted a Celt-issued cloth sack on the table next to the bed. She motioned to the young girl still under the quilt. The girl quickly got up and scampered to the table. When she opened the bag she gasped and Mama Kelly noticed fresh bruises on her back. The girl pulled two small perch out of the bag and when she turned into the light Mama Kelly noticed a ripple of blood vessels ruptured around the girls left eye.

"Drop the fish. There's a place we can hide you and we may have a use for you just yet. It used to be where we went fishing but we haven't caught anything since when I was her age," she pointed to the girl with the fish. "Come with me, but don't get any ideas or I'll shoot you in the gut and let the Americans find you." The man went to grab his clothes but Mama Kelly jumped up and pointed the gun at him, "you don't need clothes where you're going! Cassi, we're going to take him to the well, see if he can help us find something to eat for dinner."

Cassi's face froze, "but Mama-"

"I said, we're taking him to the well and maybe he can get us some food down there after all!"

Cassi swallowed hard and went to open the door behind Mama Kelly. The hotel was mostly concrete from when the Celts used to hold New Caledonia as a base centuries earlier, but Mama Kelly and the madams before her had filled up the cracks with dried mud and put driftwood over everything, so that the waves of soldiers month after month wouldn't realize that the bunker might stand up to an attack better than the makeshift barracks they usually stayed in.

As the three of them walked, Mama Kelly pointing her gun behind the sweaty man with Cassi leading the way with the blade, a few emaciated girls peeked from behind the curtains separating their main room from the hallway. The girls were all afraid of gunfire but some of the older ones were leading the younger ones in songs. The girls all knew all the battle hymns for the Celts, the Vikings, and the Americans. They had also learned some ancient songs that Mama Kelly's mother had learned from her mother before her. Mama Kelly was a firm believer in the power of music and song to remind people

that they were more than animals. She was very guarded in her speech and spoke in a way that people in a different time might be tempted to call affected, over pronouncing every word with a staccato efficiency.

When they got to the last room, Mama Kelly shouted in her machine gun proper diction, "Colleen! Come outside. I need your assistance."

A tall, buxom redhead came from behind the curtain and threw a stale look at the three of them. She opened her mouth to speak something that looked like a protest but was not heard by anyone over the sound of an approaching bomb being dropped on New Caledonia. The ground shook and Mama Kelly retorted, "I don't want to hear it Colleen! Take the blade. Cassi, wait inside. We're taking him to the well to see if we can get something to eat."

The man, slightly bemused, said, "Well aren't Ah lucky? Ah've never had this kinda escort ta go for a swim before. Ah'll forsake tha order if it means Ah can live with y'all, munchin on fish for the rest of mah days."

Cassi thrust the end of the blade wrapped in cloth at Colleen then quickly scurried to the curtain before turning, "Thanks Mama."

"Thanks fer what?" The man chuckled, "how's this girl afraid of a little water?"

Mama Kelly shot a furious look at Cassi who disappeared behind the curtain, "they think the well's haunted by ghosts. It's something about the noises it makes, but they're just little girls. Let's see what kind of a fisher you are."

Mama Kelly, Colleen and the sweaty man walked down the hallway to a door behind a curtain. Behind the door was a steep set of concrete stairs leading into the pitch black below the hotel. Colleen pulled open the door and grabbed a dried log of the wall. She wrapped it in a cloth that was on the floor and went to light it in one of the lamps in the hallway. As they began the descent the man became aware of a low murmur coming from the bottom.

"So what do ya reckon-" the man began to ask about the noises when Mama Kelly clocked him in the back of the head with the butt of her rifle. The man was barely conscious as he fell and rolled down to the bottom of the stairs crashing through a wooden door. Before he fell

into the ankle deep water he was aware of the fact that the murmur had become a low wail. The water level was such that it covered his ears and some of the dirty swamp water got into his mouth. It was absolutely putrid in a way unlike any swamp he'd ever smelled. The stench alone roused him and he sat up, just in time to see Colleen and Mama Kelly wading toward him bare chested, with the cloths that had been covering their torsos ripped off and tied like bandanas around their mouth and nose.

"What was that fer! I need ta get ta deeper-" the man sat up to say something again when Mama Kelly smashed him again closer to the temple. Right before he was hit he realized that the murmur that turned into a wail had become a cacophony. The only sound he'd ever heard like it was when the Americans had shot his brother in the mouth before they killed him as a child. He saw the redhead hold the blade over her torch as she sat on his chest with her knees on his upper arms. She handed the torch to Mama Kelly.

He was confused and sat up to hear her ask, "Are you okay?"

He pulled his head all the way out of the water and looked at her in a stupor to answer. "Well Ah-" but before he could finish the redhead's eyes flashed and she reached into his mouth and grabbed tongue from its base, pulling it so hard he thought his throat would come out with it, then sliced through it with the hot machete. The pain was so intense the man couldn't react when she stood up. Mama Kelly leaned in from out of the darkness and pulled a chain around his neck. Colleen stood up off him and got up. When he tried to stand she kicked him in the ribs on his left several times until he tuned over. He tried to get up but when he was on all fours Colleen sat across his backside facing the opposite directions and used the hot machete to cleanly slice through both his Achilles tendons.

The trauma was almost so much that the man lost consciousness, but he didn't. He tried to scream but was choking on the blood from the stump in his mouth, and every time he tried to speak a shockwave of pain went down his jaw and neck. When he tried to push himself up his feet didn't cooperate and he fell against the chain, choking himself and setting off the chain reaction of pain and writhing where the scream should have been. He fell onto his back and breathed heavily, gurgling blood in agony.

His ears were underwater and his mouth, legs and head were throbbing. He became conscious even through the putrid swamp water that the cacophony in the wail was now accompanied by splashes and rattling chains. He looked toward the torch and saw the redhead, breathing heavily, standing with blade in one hand and a bloody lump of meat he once used to preach in another. From her breathing pattern it looked like she screamed something and then tossed his tongue away from her in the near darkness.

With his last gaze the man saw the ghosts that haunted the well. Splashes came from the darkness toward where his tongue had landed, and he saw a filthy, pale right hand come out of the darkness feeling around the water. When the hand came up with the tongue he saw the fingernails that were still there were half as long as the finger and caked with blood and dirt. Out of the darkness crawled the shell of a Viking with grotesque scars where his eyes had been and teeth stained with blood, screaming the inarticulate bloodcurdling yells the man himself had been giving just moments before, but somehow there was something even more terrifying about this man's yelling. The skeleton of a man was screaming for joy. He clutched tongue with his other hand and went to move it toward his mouth. Out of the darkness came a second right hand, grabbing at the Viking's arm. A second Viking with scars for eyes pounced out of the darkness and they began wrestling for their new found prize. Before the man could witness any more of this utterly hopeless squabble, he felt a cold hand grab his jaw and saw the end of blade quickly move toward him.

Cassi had come back out to the hallway and waited watching the door. The screams of nearly a dozen ghosts ran throughout the hotel. It fell suddenly to a low murmur muffled by the door at the bottom of the stairs, and she knew that soon Mama Kelly and Colleen would come through the door. When they opened the door Colleen only had a cloth wrapped around her waist. She tore the cloth that was over her face and gasped for fresh air right before running out to the cistern to wash. Mama Kelly grabbed one of the cloths from the floor and wiped down her bare feet before putting her rabbit fur slippers back on. She threw the rag back through the door and slammed it shut.

Mama Kelly looked at Cassi, frozen in fear at what must have happened downstairs, "What?" she asked.

"Mama, I know we have to eat, but Mama . . . he . . . he was-"

"Human?"

"Yes, Mama."

Mama Kelly took a deep breath. "Cassi baby, he was a man profiting from pain by convincing people to give their lives for the only cause even more fruitless than the war. You saw what he did to Moira? He didn't even know the difference between fucking and fighting. He was an animal. Baby, you've got to toughen up and remember what makes us human. He stopped being human a long time ago." She paused coldly. She didn't believe in sympathy. Being kind only prolongs someone's pain. "Now, the Americans are going to be here soon. Get some girls to put a curtain and some driftwood up over the door to the well. We don't want them knowing we've got meat."

Cassi stayed where she was and her lower lip quivered. Mama Kelly looked at her with an ironclad façade of sternness, "Cassi! Do you want to eat or not!" Cassi stood up and scampered to the room, "Cassi!" she turned, "tell the other girls to put up the wall, go out with Colleen and wash up and try to look like you're enjoying being liberated. It's been a while since the Americans were here and could use some more of their boots."

She walked over and put her hand on Cassi's shoulder, "Now Cassi, let me see that pretty smile."

# **Sony – jsdeerwood**

## **Chapter 1: Eat.**

Sony.

It was on a shard piece dug from the ground of marsh roots by her brother the day she was born. Sony was a pretty sound. He was dead by the third year. Mother didn't cry. The factory had dried them all. Apparently, three boys off to the front. But Mother never talked of them so the number was never truly known. Father too, the Celtic with the blond she had inherited. Most likely he was dead. But again no use to grieve. It hurts too much to grieve on a stomach that eats itself to survive.

Sony was alone, six years old digging through the marshlands that stretch to eternity (but it ended apparently – funny that. It ended with war apparently. And then, sometimes she tell Mother when she was back from another day working on another tank, she could hear the bombs and the echoes of rat-a-tat-a-tat-a-tat. And on one dark night screams and more in a flash bang, only an instant, and eyes and skin that melted away in her dreams.

Mother told her not to talk about that. Never talk about that.

She would get snappy too if Sony asked when they were finished making tanks. It was never ending. She wanted mother in the marshlands with her, digging for any roots and good grass. If you were lucky, there was a mild flooding and the cockroaches would come up for dry land. That one chance of a decent meal. She would grab them, fight for them, but against the boys she was no match (none of them were, it was evident with every gouge that added with every year. Every week there was one less. She was only starting to notice it now).

But Mother never stopped going to the factory. Every time the question asked, Mother snapped back "Don't question Dear leader. Don't ever."

Don't. Because bad stuff would happen.

The hunger was making her keel over now.



So that morning (after a particularly bad night of booming that even Mother couldn't deny was real that night. A shrieking through the air and sudden silence) Sony didn't ask as Mother tried for the third time to get up (another rib visible today. Sony didn't see). And off she went over the Marshlands to build another tank.

The boys were more restless today (they did when death was on the doorstep. When the roots seemed to disappear from the ground). So Sony went another route.

Time passed in a six year old delirium that echoed strangely back to the painful shaking of her stomach lining as it bloated out and chewed on itself.

Further she went.

She wasn't even thinking of the roots that would not be under her feet, even with wishful thinking while digging. No bark (trees were dead) water was deadly now (something wrong with it that only cockroaches could withstand) No anything but empty shells that once signified life. But life was a living dead.

When a six year old gives up, they make a whine sometimes. They make the whine because they know somewhere there could be someone close that cares. Even strangers cared. But Sony knew better than to whine. That there was any chance.

It was a wrecked plane she decided to give up under. She curled around a broken stomach under a broken wing and closed her eyes to give in.

It was when the wing stuttered that brought her partway back. With last strength she crawled and pulled herself onto wing that was still attached to the body of the plane (the plane that was somehow attached to the screams of her nightmares last night), and wide eyed, she glanced food. It was food. And that wasn't the problem now.

What was a problem, was when the food turned to you and with equal wide eyes holds out a stump and stutters 'Help me.... Help mmmme.'

She and Mother had done it once before. It was just lying there, outside their door (you had to refer to it as 'it' if you wanted to stay human... but who was human now?). It wasn't needed by anyone, especially not by it any more ('Shell' Mother had said. She had said it was just a 'shell'). But that particular one was already dead.

The Viking did it again: 'Help mmmme.'

Sony stared.

Celtic and Viking both wide eyed.

Vikings were enemies. She recognized the tattered emblem on the sleeve, a Viking through and through who ate children, who burned people alive who were evil through and through.

And here was one. Not fiery eyed, leering or indeed the embodiment of evil, but staring helplessly at a six year old girl who was dying ever so slightly slower than he was.

If he died, she could eat. If she helped him survive, she would die.

But all she could seem to do was stare into the Viking's blue eyes like her own. Like the sky.

It was sanguine red by the time she had returned. It was just in time too. If it were any longer they would have locked down the area (anything moves – it's shot. They wouldn't want any more scarce to be had workers escape, dead or hurt before they could finish the tank, could they?).

Sony sat on the steps, waiting for mother and watched the sun set, planning what to tell her.

How would she react when Sony whispered secretly about the Viking she discovered? How she had held his hand (would that count as fraternizing with the enemy? - mother wouldn't tell). She would tell her how he coughed his last and splattered blood in her face as he rolled his eyes back into death... How Sony had licked the blood from of her lips and (slightly hesitant at first but quite quickly all the same) bitten down....

She licked her lips again, but not in some delight. It was more in some sort of desperation. How (when she came over the Marshlands) would Mother react when she would tell of where she had hidden a bitten body, rolled it out and under the plane (it took two precious hours to complete). How would mother react when she found out that they could eat now a month at least?

But as Sony's head bobbed further down, until sun set was replaced with grey distant night. She didn't see Mother.

And Mother never came.

## **Chapter 2: Walk.**

"It's him again."

"Who?"

Colt turned and looked where his elder brother did, just in time to see a tiny head duck behind a broken shard of metal.

"You think he wants something?" He asked.

"You think he's threat? Really Colt?"

"I don't think a little six year old shit is a danger Beeta!"

(Colt was wrong; Sony – named after a sound on metal scraps - was about seven. Not that even she knew that.)

"Well why don't you tell him to piss off?"

"He's been following us for days. What do you think he wants?" Colt asked. The twelve year old Beeta crouched to the ground and brushed his hand around the mud.

"Probably wants to be one of us. Hell if that's going to happen – Piss off!" He threw the stone with his good aim as Sony's head but she ducked just in time.

"I don't need another little shit to feed!"

"Hey!"

"Well you are another little shit to feed." Beeta turned walking away, his hands in pockets again. "You smell like it most days."

"You're not exactly a pleasant smell either." But Colt lost any other argument as Beeta hit him around the head and the pair walked off into oblivion.

Sony came out and stood alone again in the middle of the marshlands, tucking a free lock of blond back under the aviator hat.

Walk.

Keep walking.

Just like that day. Keep walking and you might find something to eat again.

She'd walked for some time. A long time, but seven year old minds can make an eternity out of just one day. She could have been eight years old for all she knew.

She had walked since the days after that body was found by her. That Viking crash and source that tasted unpleasant every time she thought back; and yet the unpleasantness was what kept her going.

The night Mother didn't return, Sony had waited, slumbering upright in the shack's doorway. But the Celts needed their tanks. Perhaps it was overtime, they needed it right away.

Another day of route digging (another cut and bite from a body when nothing could be found) and back again. Still Mother didn't come.

Something people fail to remember is that six year olds are smart. Much smarter than usually believed.

Smarter still when every day you've fought another day to live for some odd reason. No reason but to see another day dawning. But Sony never thought about questioning that.

Sony knew the third morning that Mother wasn't coming back.

If Mother wasn't coming, the bad Celts would.

The bad Celts would come and ask why you weren't at the factory. And after they asked someone, that someone was never seen again. More to the point, the child that was with that someone was never seen again.

Children may be a precious resource: A future soldier and worker for eternal war. But if there was no one around to look after it, it was just another hopeless mouth to feed.

Sony didn't want to disappear.

And that word hazed over her mind with that suffocating marsh fog choking out of the dawn:

Walk.

If she didn't want to disappear with the Celts, she would have to walk. She would have to disappear that way.

So she walked.

First into the house, grabbing that knife under the pillow that Mother had always kept sharp. Grabbing the pair of age old wellies that were only for dire occasions.

Mother told her, if anything happened, to walk. She knew how to dig for roots, she knew never to trust anyone. Not from any side or any age. Mother told her, link up with other children – the slightly older

ones, the ones who truly knew how to extend to fight. The ones who had escaped themselves from war.

But no one really does. No one can really escape it.

The most important advice came to her mind and as she walked the way she had the fateful day. It rung through her mind:

Boys they will just kill. But to girls they will do worse before they let you die.

She ducked under a broken wing of a plane, towards a smell beginning to simmer with three days.

She took the body's leather coat, rolling up the adult sleeves to six year old length (cutting off the Viking badge – that would have been a walking death sentence), she took the aviator hat, and before sliding it on she cut her hair as short as the knife and herself could get it to go before slipping it on. But hair always grew back.

Far, far through the marshes she walked until crawling along, there in the distance, the unarmed battered fence from many a century. Who ever really got this far before they gave up? All they saw was what they could have behind them: Marshland waste.

It wasn't long before Sony found a tattered end and scratched her way through to something that perhaps would have been labelled 'freedom' but that word had curled up and died some fourteen hundred years since. Without turning back she began to walk through Celtic labelled wastes.

And just kept walking.

There was no sense of direction, no right or left. No north or east. Just mass marsh that she kept to like lava all around as mantra went through her head: Don't touch the water, the water is evil. Don't touch the water, the water is nuclear, and whatever that meant it was bad. In her dreams, nuclear was a flash, a silent scream and melting faces. Hundreds of thousands of melting faces turning slowly into oblivion.

And Sony kept walking.

She'd have to change direction a lot – the marshes ground would drop to nothing but a far mass of brown water that seemed almost to curve to a line in the far distance. Nothing but water. She couldn't understand why it seemed curved.... It nerved her. But she kept

going. She dug the roots, eat and suck them for good water, she scrabbled for the cockroaches.

Once, like some non-existent birthday she found a dead rat. She only recognized it from the tattered book they had kept in the shack. The one with strange beasts and creature that Mother reassured were quite extinct.

Sometimes she would follow a tiny crowd at a distance - one of small feet, trying like her, and shooing her away. Other times she hid, knife at the ready as larger boots thumped past, and as they did she repeated the second mantra: I am a boy. I am boy. I am a boy. Meet anyone by mistake and that's what to insist. But it never happened much.

But now she had stopped walking. Now she found no need to do anything but to watch, staring with the bright blue eyes until the two brothers disappeared. That sanguine sky was returning like it always did.

Marshland behind and marshland in front and marshland in between. Roots and evil water, evil men and metal. Broken rusting metal. A war somewhere and always eternal. Always all around. Invisible force, but still heard.

In Celtic land or other ones, Sony was and would forever be, in the presence of the Eternal...

....

... .

...He was too loud.

Sony was faster, she spun and wielded the knife, ready to stab, coiled like a spring.

The man stood neutral, tattered and makeshift towards her. She noted the gun but his hand didn't go for it, if he did his heart would be punctured before it was drawn.

And then Sony could eat again.

Slowly he put a tanned dark hand out and signaled that he wasn't threat.

Sony kept the knife ready.

"I won't hurt you." (She'd never heard that accent before).

"They all say that." Sony murmured.

"I know. But I won't."

"How do I know you won't?"

"You can't, you've just got to trust me."

"I don't trust you." Sony murmured.

"You're alone, aren't you?" The man said.

"Doesn't mean I'm helpless."

"I know. Most boys aren't." (At least he fell for that). "Are you hungry?" He took a step closer than he should of and she gave small lash out to show she was serious.

"I've eaten people before." She said. The man nodded.

"So have I. It's the last chance sometimes." He looked to his side and back again.

"Listen. I've watched you, a couple of days now. You're alone, but you're looking for a group, now that's the smart move to make here. Frankly, I'm looking for a group too. So if you want to join up..."

"I don't trust you." She repeated.

"I know. And frankly I can't trust you that the moment I turn, you aren't going to spring at me. But I'm taking a chance."

"I know what men do to children. My mother told me what men do to children, especially girls."

"I know men do that. I don't, but I can't prove to you that I won't. Tell you what..."

He got down on one knee to her height. "...You've got two choices, either, you keep walking on, in which case, do keep away from all, stay away from the settlements because they'll all think you some sort of enemy and keep trying with finding a group – make sure it's a younger one don't go for older men unless you're certain. Or, you can follow me until I can prove to you that I am not a threat. I'll share my food with you, you keep a distance if you want and if you can tell I'm dangerous you can stab me."

In the time he had talked, Sony's weapon had lowered and she stood looking down into deep hazel eyes in a hazel face.

"I won't have to go near you?" He shook his head.

"Not until you trust me. I'll keep the bad men away, I'll get you food, but you can keep a distance until then, following me and I won't mind. My name is Pajack."

"Sony." Sony murmured.

"Nice to meet you." He slowly got up again and began to slowly walk past her. "I'm heading this way. You can follow at a distance, or you can go." And Pajack turned, walking on his way until he disappeared past the marsh grass stumps.

She stood a little longer, knife in her hand behind with concerned blue eyes, tucking another lock of hair into the aviator cap. The sanguine sky was rusting darker with every minute.

Finally, she rolled up the adult sleeves, turned in Pajack's direction and began to walk once more.

### **Chapter 3: Evolve.**

It took three months before Sony dared to be within five metres of him. Pajack went on his way and slowly she had meandered behind. With every day, every dug root or cockroach left in a hiding place he's made sure she had seen, that gap closed ever so slightly more.

With each little offering, the seven year old meandered a little closer. Now she would sit within the circumference of a smouldered weed fire every night that he had lit. Only then when he was asleep would she take off her aviator hat and cut her locks again (He still didn't know); the mantra repeating: I'm a boy I'm a boy I'm a boy. But recently she had begun to cut it less since as she noticed Pajack kept his melanistic black hair long and tied in a pony tail that reached past his shoulders and over his pack. Now she had left alone little blond wisps that began to poke out under the raised goggles and the back.

That night, she had sat within the glow of reeling dead reeds that let no heat but a little light against all black. There were no stars tonight. There never usually were and when they had been there it was but three dim glows speckled here and there. Just as cold in the dead space as it was here. However, she still kept on the far side from him. Every now and then, the same way it had for the past three months, her finger felt the tip of her dagger.



There was another large piece of metal wedge in the ground like they did scattered across the marshlands, about a metre away from the pair who faced each other around a fizzled light. It was just enough to catch his shadow that flickered slightly, catching that wide nose on a young lean, mid-twenties face.

"So how long were you out here before I found you travelling Sony boy?" He asked, poking a curled black leaf. Sony's head raised from her knees and she snapped out of her daze of a finger stroking a knife.

"I don't know." She murmured.

"Years?" He asked.

"M'nuh uh." She shook her head.

"Months?"

"There were lots of those. I think." Her eyes looked back to the dead light. "Did you travel?" Pajack nodded.

"Lots."

"Have you seen the war?" His head nodded, but side to side – shoulder to shoulder instead of back and fourth.

"I've seen some of it. You can't help it sometimes."

"We built tanks." She said. "Mother built tanks. And I would of but I was too young. And I had some brothers and a Father. And they went to war too. But I didn't seem them again either. Vikings and Americans killed them."

"Well, Vikings and Americans will do that." He murmured.

Pajack rose and walked a couple of feet into the darkness towards what had been the edge of the marsh ground. She heard a splash and then a pattering return as he came holding a filled rusty cup.

Out of his pack he rummaged for an endless time and began one by one to pull out odd little things: A tiny flat metal case, a sharp flint (not like those two stone he pulled out and somehow made fire from), and finally his own revolver.

With a tattered cloth he dipped into the water filled cup.

"Don't do that!" Sony suddenly cried, but she made no move to stop him.

"Don't do what?"

"That!" She pointed to his hand, still dipping in the water and coming up again as he picked up the first item – the metal case – and began to polish. "It kills you the water. You die from the water because of the bombs." But Pajack kept cleaning.

"You think it's toxic?" He asked as he rubbed.

"It is toxic."

"Only to some." He replied. He smiled when he saw her expression.

"All right. It would be lie to say it isn't toxic. But we've evolved for it. We're fine with it."

"What?"

"We've evolved." He repeated, pulling his hand out and showing no horrid change to it. "See?"

"What's evolve?"

"Well, you know how you've got to adapt to different environments? How you've got to put on more layers when it's cold and take them off when it's hot?"

Sony nodded.

"Well, that happens with humans in general. You see, when all this started, all the nuclear bombs, all the water went toxic. And it did kill a lot of people – millions of people. But then other people survived it. They were stronger and could take it. So then when they had children, they were able to survive – not all, only the few who could take it. And then those who survived it had their children and gradually we got more and more use to it. And so on for a thousand years. So now you and I were born and strong enough to take it."

"But, but people still die of it."

"Well, it's still a working progress." Pajack admitted. "But I suppose we're part of that. We can take it at least. The fact you survived passed five shows that you can survive. The fact you're nearly eight shows you can take the levels. But some can't. You can know quite early who won't. Ever notice some children balding?"

Thinking back to her root digging days, related images began to link in her mind with related disappearances.

She nodded.

"If they start to bald, they won't take it. Not for long anyway. But you and I can. Want to see?"

He stretched his arm over with the cup at the end towards her. Hesitantly she unwrapped an arm from around her and pulled up the adult sleeves. Finally she just let the tips of her fingers dabble in it.

They didn't burn.

She stuck them a little further in and wiggled them about and still nothing burned. She smiled.

"Don't drink it every day though." He added. "We may be use to it, but it's not worth taking a risk. Only when you need it most. When you're on the verge do you drink it Ok?"

"Ok." He pulled it back and went back to his polishing, working now on the sharp flint. The more she looked at it, the more it shone naturally to her.

"Besides." He murmured. "They don't exactly help evolution when they're nuking it again every generation. All of them. Viking, American scum. Celt." Sony ducked forward.

"You can't hate your own people!" Sony whispered harshly. "You can't say that!"

"Say what, that the Celts are scum?"

"Stop before the bad Celts come!"

"See. Even you would admit their bad."

"Don't question the leader! Don't question your leader." Pajack looked up calmly from the flint and gazed intently at her.

"He isn't my leader." He murmured. "None of them are. And they're not yours either."

"He is my leader!"

Pajack put the polishing down.

"No, that isn't you saying that, that is what they tell you. They tell you that you belong to this man... Lycerius is his name? I don't know, it's another fiction. But you belong to no one Sony boy. Not any more."

But Sony was still bending forward with a glare that told him that she thought if he didn't stop, everything bad would happen at once. "Look. The bad Celts aren't coming-"

"They do! They do come!"

"Did they come when you left and ran?"

"No."

"Then I assure you, you don't have to fear them. You got out. They won't chase you. You don't belong to them any more."

She looked to the floor again, her arms wrapped tight around the knees and shuffled from side to side.

"Ok." She murmured.

"I mean it, Sony boy." Her eyes slowly crawled up from the ground to the fire that puffed it's last and finally met his.

In a second she trusted them more than she had ever before. "And you're not scum." He quietly added. "Not even if you yourself were once a Celt. You're not scum. People may say that to you, and they will, but you're not. Not ever."

"Ok." She said again.

He nodded, picked up his few polished things and set them back in place while she meandered down. But as she watched from the corner of her eye, she swore for a minute that he took the tiny metal case and kissed it before he put it away.

But then her eyes closed for the first time into safe sleep. It would be ready to wake for another day of the eternal walk.

#### **Chapter 4: Soo.**

The eternal walk began again when it didn't.

That was because the eternal walk, in Sony's mind, didn't mean walking. Whatever it did mean, that morning it had stayed where it was.

When both Pajack and Sony woke, it was what was planned to happen. Just keep going, or meandering close behind in whatever direction it was you were meant to go. Not that there was any direction to really necessarily go in. Just marsh. And then just keep away from that little patter on the wind. That flash out of the corner of your eye and the screams. Even away from the invisible front line, they would come in shrill calls from any direction, only once or twice in the three months

she had followed Pajack. And in the second you turned they were gone again into the infinity behind you, or the eternity in front.

It was Pajack who had heard first. He stood tense like some stag who sensed and then Sony picked it up to and look where it was he was staring.

He shot down and dragged her with her.

"What-"

A hand slapped over her mouth and silently he pointed to the rim of her sight.

Something moved.

In fact, many things moved there on the rim between dead reeds and toxic pools (toxic pools she and Pajack alone could take).

There greens didn't do anything for camouflage. In fact for a place which clung desperately on for the last drops of emerald pigment, Celtania and all it's armies had never stuck out this much in forest green before (whatever a forest was, for that matter).

It was only a handful. A small band of probably scouts out before the Engineers would come (Pajack knew. He had seen and he had survived). But there they were. Soldiers and guns. War not so invisible at all then.

Sony thought they looked small.

They wouldn't see them yet, and as the hours wore on it seemed that they would never get near enough to. But Pajack didn't let her move. He didn't let himself move.

The sun, however, had no constraint and moved quite merrily as Sony, lying further and further onto the ground, got out her knife and played silently with the dirt.

Above her, Pajack watched unblinking.

The sun moved on. But the soldiers didn't seem to want to.

About noon or past it and Sony had nudged herself away. Pajack was as still as he had been that entire day. Slowly she rose too but she couldn't see them any more.

"Are they-"

Pajack shot a hand up for silence without looking away. She returned to the dirt. There was no point to grumble along with her belly.

Finally when, as it always did, the sky rusted back to sanguine, did Pajack rise up.

"You stay here." he murmured. Still he did not look down to Sony. Sony gave a nod and nodded still further after a day of nothing but a possible end that had disappeared over the horizon and where Pajack was too disappearing.

Unlike them, he came back. They'd gone but they were going to be back some time, and this time they would probably be more along with the engineers. It was night again before they knew and here they were still, making up a tiny and abysmal dry weed fire.

Sony didn't talk about her stomach. It wasn't wise to think about or give into as it ate itself once more as it had for seven years in moments now and then.

A Viking taste was rising to her mouth again.

She licked it off her lips in a moment.

They sat opposite again on either side of the smouldering clump.

"They won't see the fire if they come." Pajack said. "No one would."

"You're not Celt are you Pajack?" Sony asked. He poked another curling nail of weed back in.

"No."

"Are you a Viking?" She asked.

"I'm not a Viking." He murmured.

"Oh. Are you... an Amer-"

"I'm not an American either."

"But..." Sony's brow furrowed. She put looked further into the logic but it wasn't happening. She wrapped her arms around her knees the same way she had the night before and tighter, pushing them into the stomach as if she could stop it by squeezing it into itself. Let it chew on another part of lining. "...You must have been one of them." Pajack gave a small smile to a candle sized flame.

"Not me. Not one of those. I suppose most people do forget."

"Forget what?"

"The fourth." He replied. "The Sioux."

"The... The Soo?" She tried to repeat. He nodded once.

"We, the Sioux."

"Who are the Soo?"

"They are dead." He replied. "Or dying. Either way, they are gone. But I remain. Not the last, but definitely lone in this waste that the last three fight over."

"But, who are the Soo?" She asked again.

"We were a great civilisation. Like all. At times, I'm told, we were greater than the others. But as time went on, as all pointed their guns in every direction possible, the Americans.... and the Celts for that matter... Perhaps even the Vikings, all pointed on us and drove us far, far back away. Over vast stretches of water until only one small area remained, far away from all the rest, pointing its guns wherever it could. But it was cornered. And suddenly the Americans thought it best to... 'neutralize' it for good. They're still trying. The Sioux fight back, but they will lose. That's why I left. A couple of years ago, maybe five or so. When I saw all was hopeless I made a raft and pushed it to the farthest piece of land I could that was not Sioux and then I walked. I kept walking and I always have. Across each territory and back again. Along the fringes where they can't see you and you can remain invisible. But the war always follows you, no matter how far you walk, no matter how long you trek. The war will always be heard, even in silent whispers. I hear it every night."

Sony raised her head.

"Me too." She said. "I hear it too." Pajack's brow rose.

"You hear it too boy?" Sony nodded.

"In the dreams." And she went on about those dreams. The rat-a-tats, the dot in the sky that falls so slowly and then ended in a flash of screams melting with burning eyes and faces. "I see the planes too."

"The planes? These ones?" Pajack moved his hands in a strange position that Sony didn't understand. That was until he nodded his head towards that broken metal that had stayed where it had the night before, the one she had watched his shadow in, and there instead of hands she saw the fighter planes.

"Yes." She smiled. "Those ones. You can shape shadows?"

"In many ways." He smiled and played around with his hands. "You know what flew before the planes? The eagles." Suddenly she saw

flapping wings and a beak open and close as it flew along the metal and she giggled. "And there were rabbits too. Like rats but with long ears." And there was a rabbit head, ears wiggling back and forward. "There were moose and dogs and wolves." The shadows shaped in turn and as it changes into a wolf he gave a little howl that made Sony giggle more. "And then people came too." and his hand turned into that of a sideways man.

He dropped it after that, but Sony still smiled. "Thousand and thousands of years ago, before this war, my people could speak to the animals. And we'd tell the stories. We were made to remember our stories of our great civilisation. Those animals became our guides." He looked deeper into the dying glow. "They were with us in spirit. But the spirits are dead now. They are all dead." Sony looked to the ground again and did that shuffle she did now and then at moments like this.

"...How did you speak to animals?" She murmured a little later. Pajack glance up out his muse and put on a small smile.

"They sang." He said. "The ancients sang to them."

"What did you sing to them?"

He he looked at her for a moment with a cocked smile and with an small intake he began to murmur a tune.

As the night silenced, it got louder, but never under a murmur. A strange sound that wasn't quite singing to Sony's mind, but which made more notes from the back of the throat rather than words, that harmonised to each other, drawn out and repeated.

It ended silently again.

"Are those words?" She asked. He nodded.

"Ancient words. Far more ancient than the war."

"What do they say?"

"I'm not quite sure myself." He admitted. "I never heard the real translation. But apparently it's a calling to aid. Calling any spirit to aid you. Some of the soldiers sang it before they went to the front line of defence when we still had a chance. But it's nothing but a song when the spirits are dead."

"Can you sing it again?" She asked.



He started, but this time Sony tried to repeat. Pajack stopped now and then, repeating a line until she got the pronunciation right. They kept going, Sony trying and sounding like it even if they were not the correct words until a single star pulsed a weak and unfelt beam of midnight down through sooted cloud cover.

They decided to give it a rest, and Sony began to bed down again. Again her eye peeked around to Pajack....

...Again he kissed that little box.

"Pajack?" She murmured. He turned. "What's that box."

"It's nothing." He murmured tucking it under a tattered coat. "Go to sleep."

She turned and curled up... Like she had under the plane. Not quite there but about to. Within the next days maybe, if they didn't eat soon.

She tried to lick Viking of her lips again. But it kept rising in a putrid subconscious until she gagged on her own vomit, swallowing it down.

She couldn't afford losing anything else.

And the night passed on, dead like the spirits.

## **Chapter 5: Food.**

She was still in a foul mood, even after two days.

Sony had seen it first those two days previous, weakly running at it while a stomach roared in protest, eating away little bit by little bit at every layer of stomach wall that was beginning to scream back.

By that third day since they spotted the soldiers, even Pajack was starting to feel the call of hunger and something beyond. He had found a stick the second day, long thick and sturdy – rare out here. He said it was just a helpful thing to hold. But Sony knew the truth.

And then there, the third day after root and cockroach had been eradicated from all ground through which they trudged, there in the distance, at the end of desperation, was what would now be labelled food. Pajack followed quickly behind the girl (who he still thought boy) with the flapping ears of the aviator hat and swinging adult sleeves on the child's arms that she let fly without a care. Those blue eyes of her fixed on the only thing she cared that moment for.

Food.

"Food!" She yelled to him, pointing down at a body, smaller than her by a couple of years, lying still on its stomach, given up and refusing to look towards the skies of a world which would have scorned him from the beginning. They looked out to the side instead, dry grey to the eternal marshes, but Sony didn't look at the shell's eyes (it is a shell. It is an 'it' and not a he).

She fumbled for the knife.

"Sony boy."

She didn't look up, crouching down and pulling at the shell's clothes.

"No Sony boy." Pajack said it a little louder. "Not food."

"What?" Gently he pulled her up and without looking pushed her away.

"Not food." He repeated. "This one isn't food."

"Of course it's food. What else have we got?"

But Pajack didn't reply. He began to search the body, crouching down and patting it over (he still held onto the wooden staff. Even now he was weakly swaying side to side). "Pajack it's food! I want to eat, it's food!"

She tried to get near the legs again but again he put an arm out and pushed her back. He turned the body over and patted it down again. He had noticed the small bundle it clutched with a stiff hand but first was to look at the body. Maybe he needed reminding: "I'm going to die if I don't eat." She said. "We're going to die."

"I know that." He murmured as matter of fact, but he didn't stop.

Finally the seven year old stomped her foot.

"I want to eat!"

"I know."

"We can eat it."

"No, we won't."

"Why not!"

"Because this one is not food."

"It is!" She yelled. "This is food and we're not taking it!"

He turned in his crouch, with relaxed hazel eyes to the pouting Sony who glared back.

"This one is not food." He insisted quietly again. "Any other body or scrap is food. But not this one. The next time we find food, I will give you all of it. I will give you all my share of it and let you eat Sony boy. But we are not going to eat any of this one." He pointed to the little body. He held the hazel gaze with the blue glare. She dropped it first. "You're an idiot!" She hissed as she ran off. Pajack knew she wouldn't be too far off though.

She had moped about a small pool and scuffed about its toxic rim while a stomach screamed out back at her. She couldn't take it. She wasn't going to.

She dropped and stabbed at the ground furiously until little angry whines yelled out with every impact. No matter how hard she dug, roots wouldn't show. Cockroaches were fleeing from her fury. The rats were non-existent and still her stomach was screaming out: I hate you Pajack! I hate you Pajack! I hate you! The mantra wouldn't stop.

After half an hour of her mind jumping back and forth, she thought perhaps she could leave. She could run away from Pajack and he wouldn't follow her – he couldn't, he had neither right nor claim. Yet something niggled at the back of her head on top of the stomach's screamed mantra: She was alone. She was a child and this world was out to kill them all.

The bad Celts could come, as could the Vikings and the American scum (Pajack seemed to hate them more). They wouldn't let her die. Not immediately. And then half those days when she couldn't find food, Pajack had found it for her, so much so she would now sit on the opposite side of a smouldering clump from him.

So why refuse her food now!? When they were both sitting and walking and falling asleep next to death!?

She kicked the ground again and an hour after she had left, she returned.

That day everything had gone back to how it used to be. Pajack tried to approach, but every metre he did, Sony scurried another metre back. He realized quite quickly and turned to walk again, his staff helping him along while Sony meandered after, sullen eyed.

He must have buried the body or something because it wasn't there when she got back. What a waste. What a horrible waste.

But Sony kept on following.

That night she watched from afar as he sat up the weed fire. She stayed where she could just see the glow, but still slept away in another high rising nest of wet bracken instead.

She got up as he did, and followed again at a distance. Finally towards the end of walking that day, as the sun got nearer to the horizon, he turned and called to her (she hid behind some dead reeds).

"Sony boy! I got you food!"

He knew how to coax her back. She still stayed some metres away from him as he put down a tiny wooden box between them. She looked up confused and he smiled. "I would have done it sooner, but you wouldn't come near. I was hoping to find more but this is all there was. Open it." he said.

Still watching him, she dragged box to her side and opened it.

Cockroaches.

Cockroaches and not just a cockroach, all dry and filling the tiny wooden box. Five cockroaches. Six cockroaches. Seven!? If it had been any less perhaps she would have just ripped them out and devoured them without a care. But this... this was the most she had ever seen.

"That boy had them on him." said Pajack. "In his bundle. I looked through it after I buried him. He must have been quite the catcher. It wasn't the hunger that got him, so it must have been illness. Nothing contagious though, but I don't think it would of helped if we ate him." Sony said nothing.

"There all yours." he added. "Just as promised." And he turned on his way, to let Sony have the privacy to sulk again. But she didn't. She stood there for a minute. Two minutes. And then picked one and ate it. And then another, and then another as if each one bided her another year more to live. Finally she took the fourth and wolfed that down, staring at the last three. Just standing and staring there hard dead casings as the sky began to turn to red.

Pajack had slowed for her to catch up. But when he turned to check once more, he didn't expect to see her right behind him with those determined eyes under the aviator hat. She didn't smile.

"Sony boy?"

She thrust a rolled up sleeve towards him with the open box and three cockroaches.

"There yours Sony boy. All yours."

She pushed them further at him. He smiled and shook his head.

"I don't want them, there yours." Why couldn't he understand?

She did it again, pushing it right into him with an agitated growl and finally, he slowly took the box. She dashed away again as Pajack watched on with a furrowed brow. But he wasn't going to turn down a meal when he was given one.

And the gap lessened again ever so slightly.

## **Chapter 6: Daisies.**

The hunger was back that night again. The cockroaches may have worked for some hours, but they weren't enough to end the previous three days of fasting. They could still see a haze on the horizon that shaped into a scythe and ribbed bodies that couldn't actually be there. All appearing on the blood red horizon on a day that ended but would always come back just as wicked as before.

That night, Sony had sat in the glow once more (sulk somewhat over), opposite to Pajack. Sitting as she always had with the knees up (holding back the stomach that even if silenced, still began to nibble at its own sides), her baggy leather arms wrapped around with her hands kept in from the cold. She kept the flaps of the aviator hat well over her ears but they still went a little number than the rest of her.

Pajack was polishing the small metal case again.

"I had a wife once, you know?" He remarked. Sony's head looked further up to him but he didn't, he still continued to polish the case.

"We had a daughter too. We called her Daisy. We called her that, because when my wife was pregnant, there were daisies suddenly growing – just once, in a small patch. No one knew what they were. We had to look through the old texts to make us remember. They were gone again by the time Daisy was born, but we called her that."

Pajack held the case out towards the glow and checked it shined enough.

"I wanted her to know what a daisy was because it was one of the few beautiful things that I've seen. So I gave her this." He helped himself up with the staff and came around to Sony side of the fire, prising the case open and sitting down next to her.

Inside the case, fallen down to one side, was a small flat, dry and battered daisy head.

"There's an ancient technique." Pajack said as Sony gazed at the daisy head. "It was one that not just the Sioux used. It was called 'Pressing'. You get two hard things – or sometimes just a book, and then you place the flower head between it, leave it for some days and it's preserved. I gave it to her, so she could always have the beautiful thing we named her after."

"What happened to them?" Sony mumbled as Pajack closed the case again.

"They died." He murmured. "Like all. That was when I left. She was your age or about."

"Oh."

She turned back to the dying glow that retched its last light of the night.

"Now Sony boy, I need you to promise me something." Sony turned back.

"What?" Pajack didn't look to her but started to look instead deep into the dying glow.

"Well, when you get older, you're going change. We all do. Then you'll be a man..." (She tucked a loose lock out of sight again) "...But... when you become a man you won't just get bigger and you won't just grow a beard. You're going to want... to do things. And those things aren't wrong, but likewise, they can be used for wrong and they can mutate into something evil."

"What can?"

"You won't understand right now." Pajack murmured, watching the sticks die one by one intently. "But there will come a time when you will. And I want you to promise me right, now: When the urges come, no matter where you are, no matter who you're with, no matter how old, no matter how many others do it too around you, no matter how

angry you can be at them, promise me now you will never do anything to any woman, no matter who, if they don't want it."

"What?"

"Just promise me Sony boy. Promise me right now you won't. Even if you think a woman is so evil she deserves it, no matter she what wears, no matter which side she's on, no matter how many people tell you it's your right, no matter how much you tell yourself she's asking for it. You never do anything to any woman unless they want it."

"O...O.K."

"You promise me Sony boy? Do you promise?"

"Yes."

"Not even if you live a long life, even past thirty, you don't. Not ever."

"Yes."

"You swear?"

"Yes."

"Look at my eyes." Sony did and saw the hazel as serious as it ever got.

"You swear to me now?"

"Yes." Sony nodded. Pajack gave a nod back and turned to watch the glow die. "... Pajack?"

"Yes?"

"What is it I can never do to women?" Pajack shook his head.

"Don't worry." He murmured. "When you're old enough you'll know. You'll understand."

In a final hiss, the glow murdered itself.

## **Chapter 7: Intrusion.**

Sony was thinking about it. Perhaps it was time to tell Pajack she wasn't boy. The only problem was that talking cost energy and that right now was something neither of them could afford.

They had heard it behind them. The same rat-a-tat-a-tat that came back to her dreams night after night. War was moving closer, and they were about to be caught up in it. They were moving now faster than they could really take, and that wasn't much at a walking pace. The

seven cockroaches' energy had been all but used up between the pair and now they had no time to dig.

When Sony found a chance for such it never gave apart from two shriveled roots they shared but still they had to keep going. And still the guns whispered behind.

There was no set direction. They moved in the same direction as the bending marshland, and that cut off as much as there was marsh to walk. They skimmed along between mud and endless brown water and still the guns followed. Neither had any idea from which side but whoever they belonged to, none was good news.

Finally around noon, that tapping beat on the wind became ever so slightly softer. Their pace slowed. Within an hour the echoes had nearly all but died – as had whatever it was that Sony had thought of telling Pajack. Something else had taken its place as well as the guns: That echoed rumble of dying stomachs.

The scythe was still there in the distance, rusting into sunset as Sony kept going behind Pajack. One blistered foot in front of another. She had stopped crying the day she could talk for who would listen? What instinct of any human was left to hear and answer the infant's cry? Tears were an instinct that she was sure had dried up centuries ago. That is, if you wanted to survive.

With each day that passed of her short seven and a bit year life, emotion was drained with them little bit by little bit.

The rain closed a curtain over the sunset that day. Darkness fell faster with it. They found a shell of an ancient shack and dropped their things within. Pajack always packed dry weeds away in case of such an event. He beat two flints above the dismal pile and another night was started with dismal glowing.

*That hunger. It was unending. It was unceasing. But it was unspeakable between them.*

Sony began to settle down near the corner of the shack where long reeds and undergrowth had begun to grow. A little more comfort where there was none. She curled up foetal but still watched Pajack on the other side as he polished away, the unending task he always did.

"What's that rock?" She asked. She pointed to that sharp rock of his she had seen before.



"It's an arrow head." He replied. "A flint one."

"What's an arrow?"

"A weapon the ancients used." He replied. "They used them instead of guns. They put them on the end of small sticks and shot them using bows. Those were like other short sticks, but they had tight string along them that bent them. And then you shoot the arrow from it," he made the arm action as if he held them, "like a bullet. I found this head when I was a boy. I was digging for roots when I came across it. I've kept it ever since for luck."

"That's how they found my name."

"Oh?"

"My brother was digging for roots too on the day I was born, and then he dug up a piece of metal, and it had 'Sony' on it. So they called me Sony." "What do you think 'Sony' is?" Pajack asked. Sony shrugged.

"I don't know. It must be an ancient thing, but it sounds nice so they called me it. What's 'Pajack'?"

"It's an ancient name." Pajack replied. "One that was used by the Sioux thousands of years before too. I was told it meant 'Thunder'. But I'm not quite sure."

"Oh."

Sony began to roll over to sleep but suddenly Pajack threw her something over the flame. "Here." She caught it and looked down to see the flint arrow. "You have it."

"I can't have it." She replied.

"I think you need more luck than me." He replied. "Me? I'd probably waste it."

"Oh..." She mumbled a thank you and slowly turned back over to sleep and hunger, while the rain tapped in lesser strength than it had that day.

When she woke, it was still night. And that was a very odd thing; especially for her. Firstly, she never found herself ever awakened apart from dawn. Secondly, she had a very bad feeling about it. At some time in the night she had rolled further into the undergrowth until she was invisible to the rest of the shack as the reeds bent back up around

her. Slowly she turned her head to peer through the reeds to the rest of the shack.

...Someone was there.

Someone else, looking silently through Pajack's bundle was there.

She saw something in their hand that looked a lot like what he finger was touching the tip of now.

She saw him take the Daisy case out and something arose, silently screaming within her and forced her to move along silently, being the shadow of the shack until she was near the door. She had probably seconds before he would turn and see with adjusting eyes the little helpless shape of a child.

He didn't.

Instead he turned to crouch towards Pajack.

Pajack awoke the moment something touched his arm and he saw a full sized body crouching over.

He went for the revolver; the intruder was quicker, foot on his arm and knife out.

A second later something dark, red and hot spattered in his face. A choked gargle, and thump and Pajack's head spun to see the intruder fall to the floor.

He slowly turned, face wet and red with the intruders blood, and saw Sony standing there, knife out and drenched with the same liquid, her face straight as she looked at her victim.

She watched the intruder fall as she slit him from behind and it was about then that her tears of rage started to form. He was face upright, eyes wide, mouth gaping... But that throat now opened seemed to smile too. The bloody slit grinned at her harder.

"No." She argued to it. But it still smiled up. "No!" Her fists shook, her eyes scrunched to hot tears of anger. "No! No!" And she kept repeating it. Again and again, but the grin wouldn't leave. "...Sony boy."

But still she yelled at it, again and again, until she found an arm around her, not a hug, but an arm no less and she let herself fall back as she cried it again and again. Tears ran thick and fast with Pajack's arm around her.

After five minutes of emotion returning, she stopped. Pajack began to rub his face clean with his spare arm. Sony still watched the grin. Sniffing once, she pointed towards it and asked what both were waiting to confirm. "Food?" Pajack nodded.

"Food." He confirmed.

And it marked the last night Sony stayed on the opposite side of the fire.

## ***Guerilla Dossier – Brugist***

The time is right to strike, my friends. Rejoice, for the bastard Lycerius leaves his house at dawn. Our dogged reconnaissance has finally caught word of a convoy leaving for the front lines in a fortnight, and word has it that our... ah... illustrious leader himself will be riding along. This opportunity presents itself at a golden time in our organization, never have we had as many agents within the Regime as we do now. The despot is unaware, we hold all the cards. Be stationed along your usual routes, I want all my eyes and ears open. Pairs of two, fully armed. At the intersection of Revolution and Pine is where we strike. Don't worry yourself that this is deep under the tyrant's control, these men are mine. Tonight we change the course of history, and bring an end to a thousand year conflict. Keep living Free my children, submit not, and always remember death is preferable to capture. -The Web

## ***The Sioux Fringes – GaryV83***

Time immemorial has passed since the first of the Glowing Suns lit the horizon. Back in those days, it is written, the heat from the Suns touched even our lands. But now no longer. It seems our tribes are no longer deemed a threat to those who wield the Suns' power. It is spoken amongst the eldest of us that we, at one time, wielded such power. But that power was too great for us and, eventually, left us with the bitter wasteland we tend to today.

We drive forth our syphon pumps into the scorched earth, whenever we are fortunate enough to find any. For most days, our pumps' hoses whirl their way thru blue waters. Glowing, deadly blue waters. Though we drink not of these tides, the little bit of untainted moisture that is dredged forth by the pumps from the muck underneath provides for a bitter saturation to our lips. The bitterness of the sustenance is even moreso. At least with the muck there is wetness. Whenever these nanotek scavengers manage to find any form of nutrition for us, we are forced to consume it in capsule form.

Living in the absolute edges of existence, most of us ask for what reason do we even continue to go on. Our lives are a continuous daily struggle to even survive, toiling behind barely useful machines to provide a meaningless, painful, cruel life. Machines strapped to our faces so that we may breathe and see. Machines strapped to our backs so that we may eat of the dirt and drink of the mud.

Some are hopeful enough to look to the horizons and believe that, where the Glowing Suns are, maybe, just maybe, therein lies cities of salvation. The more realistic of us knows that the only salvation that lies therein is contained in the fleeting embrace of a fireball.

Me, I simply stare out over the vast, ominously glowing, blue waters and think, "If it provides release from this life, would the taste of those waters be so bitter?"

## ***VikInfLog Entry #2756.10.08 – GaryV83***

Fucking madness. Fighting this war for nearly 500 years and all we've accomplished is turning this world into shit. Fucking madness.

Capt. McChrysler, CO of Viking Battalion Kilo559, posted at the 110th Meridian Viking-Celtic border. My second-in-command, 1stLt Julestone, is monitoring all communications' wavelengths for the order to advance. We have held this post for seven weeks now, long enough to observe the transition from the cold autumn months into the full-on snowing season. The morale of the men has gone from verbally irate to silently depressed. We are all completely tired in every sense of being; mentally, physically, and emotionally.

When we first arrived I was proud to tell them we were going to be the front line. Proud to explain how we were the primary offensive that would cripple the Celtic empire. Now I see my folly. The first word we received via the wireless broadcast was of dissension within the capital. While we were marching toward the enemy, back home, our friends and families were becoming the enemy. I lost 60% of my troops that first week. More and more walked off with each passing day. The threat of execution no longer phases them, so I no longer uphold the punishment. Then we had an unexpected turn of events only three days ago. Reinforcements. Granted, it was only a squad of six men, and they were the most inexperienced group of nubs I've ever laid my eyes on, but I haven't been so glad to lay my eyes on anyone since I first met my wife. They were led by Cpl. Kirk, who was ordered to fortify the front and await further orders from the Battalion CO, meaning myself. And with their CO awaiting orders, himself, there doesn't seem to be much more to do than hurry up and wait.

I've decided to man the evening reconnaissance watch myself with 1stLt Julestone as my spotter. Scanning the horizons, I find nothing but swamps, sand, and desolation. Suddenly a fleeting glimmer catches my eye. My optical implants are within calibration parameters and there was definitely something picked up by my infrared. I switch to passive thermals and the horizons still appear clear.

Without warning I hear, "Mack, you should see this."

I whip around asking, "Jules, what the fuck is so importan..." but the sight freezes the words in my mouth. Behind us, standing in front of Julestone, is Kirk. And he's chuckling.

"M..mm.Mack..."

"Jules, I see him," I say, as I've already switched my optics. As if I couldn't tell by the glow in his eyes, I can see the ionizing radiation streaming off of him. And I know precisely what this means. This cocksucker has a bomb. And he's arming it.

The last sound I hear, before the electronic beep of the nuclear trigger, is Jules: "Oh sh-"

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ENTRY TERMINATED - DATA ARCHIVER RECOVERED MILITARY RFID @  
7785.04.13 1956 UTC CELTIC-VIKING BORDER SOUTHWESTERN  
QUADRANT 212 FORMERLY LONGITUDINAL MERIDIAN 110

## ***Another Day Catalogued – GaryV83***

The nanites perform their jobs efficiently. Slither their way to the area coordinates indicate. Survey the entirety of the area for storage and memory devices, organic or otherwise. Upload and transfer all memory buffers to their own flash memory. Return to base. Simple.

Their mode of transportation makes them immune to detection, and virtually immune to all forms of weaponry. There have been the few cases of crossing over the impact zone of a nuclear strike, but these flukes must be disregarded. What was the old adage...can't make an omelet? Even if anyone were to detect the nanites sliding there way thru the six feet of topsoil towards their destination, it would be fruitless to follow them. The radiation levels throughout the swampland surrounding the cavern entrance have long exceeded approachable levels for any amount of nuclear protection.

No, these nanites are untouchables, stoically performing their programmed duties. For what or whom, no one may ever know. The only thing that appears important is that another day has been cataloged.



## ***The Chronicler – GaryV83***

My Constant Guide comes skittering thru the cavern entrance after a good three weeks of scavenging. That's how I like to refer to my Archiver/Scavenger nanites. No good scraps this time, but some decent information. Memories. Such intriguing uploads. Always love to bide my time while reading over these.

It must have been close to approximately eight millenia ago when I underwent my "great nanotech overhaul". Nanobots streamed over and throughout every millimeter of my body. It was quite a disconcerting experience. The entire process all but wiped out my prior identity completely. I believe it was meant to make me into a more efficient field surgeon. Or perhaps it was so I could retain more information as an engineer? The purpose of the operation escapes me. Too many other identities uploaded within my memory buffer cloud events of that distant past. In any case, it's all irrelevant. What is relevant is what happened within that year of initial testing and debugging. The laboratory where I was stationed suffered an unfortunate and catastrophic nuclear strike. I, alone, survived.

Fearful for a repeat of this incident, I escaped. It was during these initial wanderings that I discovered the extent at which I had been enhanced. My nano-injections provide me with the capability of drawing moisture out of the very air which surrounds me and, thus, keep me hydrated. Additionally, using this same technique, they are able to provide me sustenance from practically any material I ingest, including soil. So, virtually, I have been rendered immortal. I reiterate the word "virtually" as I am certain an attack of sufficient enough damage, such as a direct nuclear strike on my body, could render me deceased. Obviously, I have not tested this theory firsthand.

It was also during these initial wanderings that I discovered the residence which I inhabit to this very day. After several hundred miles of traveling I happened upon the mouth of this cavern. Deciding upon this place as providing adequate enough protection, I investigated further inside. What I found was baffling. After proceeding thru an initial area of natural cave formations, which stretched labyrinthine for miles thru the earth, I found one of the tunnels led into an obviously artificial cave system. These caves had been designed for a specific

purpose and to service certain people. What this purpose was and who these people were, both were a complete mystery to me. There was no evidence of either contained within. Instead, the interface system simply contained instructions on the cavern's operation. The entire artificial cavern system used the Earth's mantle, which apparently is quite adjacent to the system, in order to provide power for the cavern's operation.

Aside from all the necessary life-support systems and basic amenities, the cavern apparently served two purposes. First, it is capable of providing a never-ending supply of nanites. What the initial purpose of these nanites was, I can not say. I have, instead, programmed them for my own ends, which is serving towards the cavern's second purpose: complete historical cataloging. The memory banks contained here already had an immensely thorough catalog of Earth's history dating back to prehistoric times. It was most impressive. So I knew instantly I had a purpose for my newfound abilities. I set forth production on history cataloging nanites, Archivers, and historical artifact recovering nanites, Scavengers.

They provided me with a very detailed history of the Celtic-Viking-American War. Very fascinating. However, that war has long been dead. Victory was assured by the cunning and underhanded techniques used by Celts. Truces were made and broken. Empires fell and entire civilizations were wiped out. Genocide is nothing new to our people. However, it ensured peace. It gave the people prosperity.

I, however, still dwell within my cavern. For I alone can read the signs. I know of our history and our behaviors. Its all but an illusion. We're dawning upon the 11th millenium and, appropriately, a new era of war. Tensions are rising on the surface once again and, when combat does break out, this war will be the bloodiest this planet has ever seen. For you see, peace, unlike war, does not reign eternal.

## ***The Bureaucratic Solution –*** **manoftoomanywords**

At 28 years old, he's considered an aged relic. The young men in the other offices whisper that he should have been shot for dragging down Efficiency by now. And they're right -- if he was any other man, they would have already sent him his papers. He would have been packed up, strapped up, and shipped to the front, to die beneath the boots of a Norseman. But he's not "any other man."

He's a Bureaucrat.

One of the last of his kind, actually, though you'd never know it to look at him. He's thin, tanned, blonde; gruesome by any objective measure, really, with not one nice radiation blemish anywhere on his face. When he walks the swamps at night, people look the other way. He doesn't care. They don't know.

Don't know that in his office, every day, he's working to save the world. That the subtle art of carrying out the logistical will of The Leader demands a skill-set which is not readily second-guessed -- that this means a man in possession of such skills can take actions that others wouldn't fathom, much less understand, much less endeavor to stop.

For two years, you see, he'd funneled the money. And then for five, he'd channeled it to certain villages in the wastelands, to build him the components of a gun. A trigger here. A slide mechanism there. You had to be discreet about it; if you tried to carry a gun in the city (much less purchase one) they'd label you a guerilla and kill you on the spot.

So seven years he's toiled: pushing papers, moving zeroes, forging orders from this or that commander, monitoring ice-cap flows, gauging troop movements, poring over maps of where they've rebuilt the roads this week. Yesterday brought him good fortune: the gun arrived, full-constructed, sleek-black and deadly, in a package marked "Paper Plates".

Last night, he took it out into the swamps to test it. He found a rat out there, stuck in the black muddy ooze, and staring up at him with eyes

as pitiful as they were exhausted. The Bureaucrat knew the feeling. He fired his first shot, and the rat died immediately.

So now he knows the gun works.

The rest will be easy.

In two weeks' time, the Bureaucrat will meet a squad from the army, carrying a nuclear bomb for routine yearly inspection. They'll give him their forms, and he'll give them his signature, and the bomb will go on to blow up a few thousand tanks in who-cares-what distant city.

But not this time. This time, when they set the bomb down in front of him, he'll crack a joke. He'll offer them something to drink. He'll wait until their backs are turned, and then he'll pull out his gun and shoot them all dead. Bang bang. Take that.

He'll tear the bomb open and find the part that makes it go. How hard can it be? They trust 12-year-old spies to set these things off in the back of milk-trucks, don't they? So he'll find this button, or this valve, or this lever, and he'll push it, turn it, flip it, whatever -- and up goes the bomb, and up goes the Bureaucrat, and with him the capital city of the Celtic empire.

The rest will be easy.

With the head of the snake cut off, the body will die. The Celtic empire will fold, the Vikings will move in, the Americans, delayed at sea, will falter, two days too late. The Vikings will conquer the Celtic cities, and soon the American ones. The stalemate will be broken. The war will be over. There will be Peace.

Peace.

He still remembers the day he found out it wasn't real. That magical notion -- a day when everyone stopped fighting, for 24 hours, and reflected on their unified suffering, rather than their individual hatred.

"Peace isn't real." his brother had scoffed, poking at gas-bubbles in the mud, and sucking on the end of a shell-casing he'd found scavenging in the body-ditch a week before. "No one really stops fighting, you know. On Peace-day. The Vikings are building bombs, and the Americans are building planes, and we're moving our tanks to start fighting them both again at midnight." The Bureaucrat had cried for an hour. Then a bomb had taken out the village, and the severed burning

arm of his brother had flown up from beyond the grave and punched him right in the face. The rest had been sort of a blur.

But no more. Not a single day longer. Not one more minute, not one more paper, not one more bullet, not one more dead. He'll shoot the soldiers, get the bomb, blow the city, and make Peace.

But what he doesn't know is that there's another man, in another city, with much the same plan. And ANOTHER man, in ANOTHER city, with the same plan yet again. And what none of them will realize--and would never fathom, much less understand, much less endeavor to stop--is that this has all happened before. It's nothing new. The capitals have fallen a hundred thousand times, and they'll do so a hundred thousand more. They'll rebuild. They'll restock. The dead bureaucrats will be replaced. The tanks will be built. The spies will be trained. The bombs will be primed.

The rest will be easy.

## ***Truce-Break at the Border Saloon –*** **manoftoomanywords**

The Viking at the bar felt daggers staring into his back.

"Hey O-laf!" the American hollered.

"Don't start now." muttered the Viking.

"Hey O-laf! Where your beard?!"

The Viking nursed his drink, and glared into the grain of the bar, tracing a knot in the wood with his eyes. Behind him, he heard the American drunkenly stagger to his feet, chair clattering to the floor. He heard hard-tack boots coming across the floor. A meaty fist thumping down on the counter -- another on his back.

"Hey Olaf you look at me when I'm talkin to you Olaf you big Nord sonofabitch," said the American, stopping to breathe, before adding "fuck you." He leaned close into the Viking's face, breath rancid with swamp-meat and god knew what else. He said, "Who you think you are? Who you think you are? Who you think you are, comin in here? O-laf?"

"Leave it be," said the Viking, "haven't you heard? We're friends this week."

"Bear-fucker. You people killed my friend. You know that? You killed him right in front of me."

"Oh aye?"

"Stabbed him with one a'them meat-hooks, right in his fuckin face."

"Oh. Aye."

"All lit him on fire, danced around it."

The Viking sighed, "Yes, we have been known to do that." and tried to ignore him.

"Hold on," called one of the American's friends. "Jim, hey, what's the problem? He ain't a Celt! He's a Viking!"

"I can tell 'em apart!" Jim shouted back.

"So he's a friend!" said the other. "Leave him alone, you dumb drunk!"

Stupid kid. Earnest. Probably his head was fresh off the presses. Maybe he thought a Viking had saved his life one time, or had a vague sense-memory of his uncle being half-Viking. Jim, though, was probably too far gone for all that. There was a hatred in his eye that no amount of reeducation could ever get rid of. Why all of a sudden, though? He'd been sitting at his table for the better part of an hour. It was the drink, the Viking thought suddenly, and scowled. Dug up old memories. Lit that fire anew. Damn stuff.

"Listen to your friend, Jim." said the Viking, speaking softly.

But Jim the American was too drunk to be deterred. He called, "You shut the fuck up, Troy!" to his friend at the table. "You don't know! You see some shit first and then you talk to me! You won't forget THAT!" he spat. "You just TRY to!"

"You're drunk." Troy laughed, and waved him off.

"Yeah but not you, O-laf." Jim muttered, low in the Viking's ear. "You big dumb sonofabitch. You seen some shit, eh Olaf?"

"Aye."

"You know."

"I do. And that's why I'll give you three seconds," said the Viking, "to turn around, and walk away. We've no need to do this for a full week yet. I'll kill you come Monday, and even grant you the pleasure of defending some town you've been instructed to think you love. And then I'll fuck your corpse. Or eat it, depending on the time of day. But you have a whole week of life yet before then, friend Jim. Or it can happen right here. If you like. It's your choice."

"Fuck you." said Jim.

The Viking said, "One."

Jim reached for his belt.

The Viking said, "Two."

"You Odin-licker," said Jim, fumbling at his holster, "bear-fucker," grabbing his gun and bellowing, "FUCK YOU!"

Olaf the Viking said, "Three."

## ***The Bombs Fall – GodGinger***

All able men go out to fight,  
and those old or weak, they build the roads,  
while the women keep the home.  
And the bombs fall.  
Our nation shows it's might,  
together forever we carry our loads,  
we work to the bone.  
And the bombs fall.  
We know we're right,  
Every citizen knows the warrior codes,  
we all die alone.  
And the bombs fall.  
The soldiers continue to march,  
The tanks continue to rumble,  
The lands continue to parch,  
No one must ever fumble,  
Still the bombs fall.  
The citizens still listen,  
as the politicians still lie.  
Even as neighbors go missing,  
And the leaders never die.  
Still the bombs fall.  
A homeless man starves in the street,  
never noticing the marching feet.  
One flag comes down, another takes its place.  
The sun goes round, and never loses pace.  
And the bombs fall.  
Generations die.  
Centuries pass.  
The children cry,  
Well those who last.  
Because the bombs still fall.



## ***Hope* – John\_Smith\_1994**

She let him do it. Not because she was weak or because she was afraid. Just on the off-chance that he would throw her something, some money, some food after he was done. It was strange because she wasn't knew to this feeling - both the personal invasion and sex as a concept - but she felt ashamed this time. She didn't show it and he seemed to enjoy himself in spite of that. She was so numb to feeling and she wasn't sure whether she was just angry with him or disgusted with herself. It wouldn't matter if he would just give her something in return.

Another beggar stumbled past, drunk or dying, and fell over in a pile of debris. She watched the beggar lay there, his chest rising and falling: he wasn't dead and neither was she. The man raping her seemed to be finishing - he forced her eyes to meet with his and he grinned, showing a mouth empty of teeth and releasing a hot breath of deathly air.

She looked away again. The beggar got up, vomited on the dirt, and moved on. She guessed he was one of the Vikings. Her parents had always sad how well the Vikings had it compared to them. She would have dismissed it as wishful thinking - the wish being that somewhere, some people haven't this pain - but living so close to the border she had seen evidence to support this. Sure, their nation floundered too and their people lived in the streets but never had she seen such strangely hopeful people.

When the Vikings conquered her slums when she was 11, Viking townspeople followed their soldiers in with victory. When anything similar happened for the celts, those who were still ambulant watched from the streets with nothing but dispassion.

The man fell on his side, finally finished, wheezed something and stood up. She was crying and hadn't realised it. He looked her in the eyes again and she mistook that for compassion. He walked off with not a parting word, let alone anything in return for what she did.

She decided she should probably get home. Her mother would be disappointed that she was empty-handed, but at least people still wanted to touch her. The only thing her mother could provide was the

non-existent benefits from her factory work. The last time they paid her, it was when currency had become so worthless that people put it in their pockets to help them drown, like her father had done a few years earlier. When it wasn't so, they simply let people work on the promise that they would one day be paid. She thought her mother was stupid for being so easily fooled.

The smell of death got more intense as she reached the creek and the slum. When the tide went down, fresh corpses lined the river's bed and the particularly glib, upon recognising a loved one, would wander into the poisonous bed of mud and move the body somewhere more ceremonial. This was how Mrs Lanvegad, the oldest woman she had ever met, met her demise. Her husband had ended his life in a fashion similar to the girl's father, and when the tide went Mrs Lanvegad stood in the river trying to find his body. She never did, and within two months succumbed to a tumour that grew in her neck.

In the distance, the edges of the slums were visible. The girl's mother was walking out to meet her. Her mother, she surmised, had a few years left of life barring any change in circumstance. She was in her mid-forties and to compare, Mrs Lanvegad had died at an age a few years older than that. She braced herself to be hit, for it was clear she had no food or money on her person.

Her mother didn't look angry, but she walked briskly and with a face of determination. The girl was crying again and felt foolish. She got so close to her mother that they could hear each other's footsteps. Her mother raised both hands, and the girl winced.

They made contact. Her mother embraced her quite suddenly, shocking the girl more than any abuse could have. Openly crying, the girl scolded herself. Her mother's thin and bony arms around her shoulders were a strange comfort. Her mother whispered in her ear something about leaving. The girl was baffled to what brought this on. Was it hope?

They finished their embrace and the girl wiped her face of tears. She looked in her mother's eyes and saw it. The same look that she saw in the eyes of Vikings upon victory. A half-smile.

Her mother was hopeful.

## ***Saved.* – Ghost\_Road**

The world was a shifting fog of white, and sounded like the fjernsyn after the station went off air for the night. I tried to roll into a less uncomfortable position. There wasn't one.

I hurt, so obviously I was still alive. I silently thanked the Allfather, (blessed is he who fights in his name. He will earn a place at His table.) The Celt tank had obviously laid a direct hit on us. Smoke, twisted metal and other... things were spread on the ground. Half of Magnus lay before me, eyes unseeing. I felt a twinge of envy at his corpse. He would this moment be carried home by a Valkyrie.

Sound returning grudgingly to my shattered eardrums. I listened for the throaty rumble of the enemy tank, but nothing. Crackle of flame, tink of metal heating and popping. No enemy sound.

I allowed myself a moment to take stock of my situation. Nothing felt broken, nothing felt too wet. I was probably intact. Pulling myself off the road, I flopped into the cover of a ditch.

Now I could say I'd seen the righteous horror of The Front. All my life, this place loomed large. It was where heroes went to fight for honour, country and the Allfather. Where victories were won, keeping at bay the endless tide of the godless Communist Celt horde.

The sagas of The Front were replayed over and over on the fjernsyn. From historical times, until today, we had taken the battle of good versus evil to the lands of the apocalypse. In our shame, over a thousand years ago we had let the godless Celts overrun the Egyptians, all the while talking of appeasement and treaties. But there was no appeasing a people whose lust for conquest was so strong that they would rather turn our cities into irradiated holes than live peacefully within their borders. The largest nation on earth, but still never satisfied. So jealous of our free way of life that they wouldn't rest until they'd conquered everyone and brought an end to civilization. Manifest destiny, they called it. But it was just a cover for their lust for power, greed and bloody murder. Well we were born to hold fast the tide. We were Vikings. What you brought to us, you reaped double. So the elders and Jarls had told us. And we were making good our promise.

It had been 3 months since one of their spies had detonated another Mjolnir in El Amarna. Once more they had shown us their true colours. Well it was time for them to see ours.

My unit had been scouting the isthmus of Giza, looking for an enemy column. We found it's advance party. I stumbled toward the burning Celt tank. Up close, I could see it was a MK5 Fragarach. It's brutally angular body now collapsed upon it's tracks.

From the side I heard a mewling noise. I spun. He was a fair haired boy. He must have been my age. The skin hung off his arms like a dirty silk drape. He motioned, grimacing. He spoke weakly in the harsh language of the Celt. I caught a little.

"Save me", he pleaded. He was the enemy. But looking at him, I realized how little the differences were. He was fair. I was fair. He was scared. I was scared.

"Will you please save me?" Again, his weakened voice pleaded. I knelt. He was a soldier. He had willingly set himself against his enemies. Whether he was a godless celt or not, that had to be admired. I resolved to save him.

"Certainly", I replied. I took his hand. He smiled a little. I took my knife and ran it across his throat. He looked confused, then sad, then he looked no more.

I felt a twinge of envy at his corpse. He would this moment be carried home by a Valkyrie.

## ***A Brief Allegory – FluxMiller***

We all have stories about the beginning of the war...

I remember when I was a young boy in my home town. In the fog of my memories, two things stand out: we lived close to the border and we were always at war. Dad went to war, I was expected to join him in a few years.

Our house was in a small, green, cottage. We were proud of it and of the work of our family had put in it. As a kid, I hardly noticed how beautiful was that place. We had everything we could need and want. Even a TV room. Once in a while me and my friends would go in and watch cartoons. My mom and my aunt always entered there and left several hours later. They never let me inside that room when they watched the news.

One day I managed to peek in. I was just a small curious child. I saw in the TV the picture of many big, big clouds rise from the ground. For some reason that image made my mom and aunt cry. For hours, they wept together, shoulder to shoulder. Why were they crying? Would their grief be *eternal*?

# ***Stories from the Edge of History – FluxMiller***

## **Chapter 1**

We have been at war since I remember. My father and the father of my father both entered the army and proudly served in it. I joined when our nation called and entered the war with the other super powers of the globe. I don't fear death. My nation and my family give me the strength to overcome the hardships of this rotting world. But... just like the earth below them, the sound of Howitzers makes our hearts tremble. The trenches and fortresses and dark, obscure redoubts make the cold horizon a place of nightmares. Me and my comrades have to face this monstrous world in the company of our loyal rifles. People isn't loyal... Not even your long time school buddies; they die and leave you alone in this asshole of the universe. How I miss my green cottage with my beautiful family! The warm place of earth that I'd wish to be.

We have heard rumors that this war is going to end soon. A diplomatic solution is underway, they say. We fear that this dark, sterile world is our only heritage to our sons. Today is only this battle ground, but I've seen war, I know it can engulf all places where man can be. But maybe... maybe hope isn't something to throw away so soon...

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What is that in the sky? Could those bastards really believe they can end this war with only one H-bomb? Or a sky full of them?

## **Chapter 2**

This is the worst time to think about anything. My brain is crying over the huge dose of adrenaline, the Sun is staring at my eyes, and I'm falling off a plane in a paratrooper operation over enemy territory. But it is in this improbable conditions that everything finally comes clear.

For weeks we've heard that this war with the other two nations would end soon thanks to the negotiations. This is the outcome millions hope. But I've seen the war. Ever since it's outbreak last summer, we've been losing hundreds of soldiers, all engulfed by the raging flames of this chaotic series of skirmishes. Oh I wish this could just *end* with the signature of a paper or two... But, what do I see bellow

my feet? Huge trenches that look like gruesome veins of a rotting corpse. This war is meant to be won, even if it destroys the whole fucking world.

I hate the landing part. I never know if I'll be welcomed by warm, soft grass, or a spear-like antenna.

***"The Lycerian Party are WARMONGERS! 3002 is the year and you shall vote for PEACE!" – SirCannonFodder***

"For centuries now the Celtic nation has been in a state of war. Long have the ruling Lycerian Party promised to end it, at each election saying "Just one more term." Yet peace never comes. Each time a peace agreement is brokered, our dutiful senate struggles to hold back the blood-lust of the Lycerians, constantly bringing us to the brink of attacking our neighbours. Knowing this, the Vikings have little choice but to strike pre-emptively at our over-funded, over-equipped, and over-aggressive military.

As they wage their pointless war, our people starve. "No, you may not build a granary," says President Breathnach, "your steel is needed to build a tank." "No, you may not cut away the swamps," he sneers, "your men are needed to cut away other men." They say they fight for our safety, for our children's future, but are President Breathnach's children the ones dying in the radioactive swamps of Byblos? Freezing to death on the mountains of el-Amarna? Being vaporised by nuclear torpedoes in Sydney Harbour? Of course not. Nor were the children of Presidents ó Mordha, Mac Lochlainn, Mac Carthaigh, or any of the last 20 Lycerian presidents.

Your cries for peace have fallen on deaf ears, but no longer. Vote for the PEACE PARTY, and we shall END THIS WAR!"

(This ancient piece of subversive fiction was found hidden in the secret library of a high-ranking Party member, among many such fictitious documents. Contrary to the official Party histories, this article, and others found, seem to suggest that at one point there was a governmental body known as a "senate", that people were allowed a choice in ruling parties (of which there was more than one), and that The Great Leader Lycerius was not in fact a person, but a group of people held together by common ideals. Each of those concepts are ludicrous, of course, so much so that they barely even constitute thoughtcrime.)



## ***Death of an Agent – Larklight***

Angharad crept down the midnight streets of Trondheim, trying to keep the disgust off her face. It was a foul place; filled with mosquitoes and plague, the population grumpy and irritable. The city was dominated by the war; factories belching smoke, posters for this cursed people.

She missed home - wonderful Celtia! An ancient civilization that had thrown off the delusions of religion and embraced the truth of Dialectic Materialism. Full of gorgeous wetlands, vibrant with life, and with an admirably taciturn people.

Still, she knew what she had to do, the words of Commander Arland still fresh in her mind after all this time. The device in her backpack pressed down on her with all their weight of history. She would be the one to make the difference. Her years as a sleeper agent, cut off from civilization, would all pay off.

She silently approached the juvenile indoctrination center, or "school" as they called it. Tomorrow a thousand children would be saved forever from the lies of their teachers. She savoured the feeling, her pride warming her against the still night air.

Suddenly, a burst of fire ripped through the air, smashing her to the ground.

An armoured personnel carrier slammed to a halt, and a group of men jumped out, quickly verified her corpse. One of the officers turned to the man in civilian clothes.

"Thank you for your help, Bryher. I hate to think what she could have done without your information."

"Eugh," replied Bryher, "I hate these terrorists. They have deep pockets, if they can even turn Celts against Vikings. Have our people not been allies for over a thousand years?"

## ***Things he Didn't Know – FlaSmerdy***

Three-Fingers emerged from the dismal swamp, a leather sack heaped over his back. He had hunted well and nabbed 3 Glowfrogs for The Nest. It had taken four days of hard travel but the Swamp had provided for Her children, as she always had. Three-Fingers loved the land: it's cooling, black waters, it's twisting thick trees, the occasional poison clouds that separated the strong from the weak.

As he approached The Nest he knelt down quietly, laying down his battered and ancient rifle. He gave 3 short whistles, or what might pass for whistles, as a signal to his tribemates he was no threat. Out of the vegetation rose No-Jaw, waving Three-Fingers over. Three-Fingers smiled. Home at last!

Three-Fingers signed to No-Jaw a greeting, for his people had no verbal language. No-Jaw pointed to his forehead, his tongue dangling in the air. "Well?"

Three-Fingers smiled and shook his head, his hands moving wildly. "Very good. 3 Glowfrogs. Good shots. Meat still good." No-Jaw pointed to the hole in a small hill, bones littered in front.

"You. Inside. Chief has bad news."

"All us ok?"

"Us ok. Food escape. Lucky you have more." Three-Fingers stomped his feet, the splashes of water echoing his anger.

"I speak to him later. Which way it go?" No-Jaw pointed towards the east. Three-Fingers handed him his sack, grunted in a final expression of frustration, and head out to the east.

The creature he was trailing was dangerous, but in the swamps Three-Fingers had the advantage. Usually the creatures preferred to stay close to the pillars of rock they nested in, and to hunt them there was certain death. But around the booms that signaled the locations their herds, some would often wander off into the murky waters, easy prey for a proud and noble hunter.

"Tatoesuka," that's what the Elders had called them, and they had always been instructed to hunt them most gleefully. While not having much meat, they all ways carried nifty tools his people might use.

Rifles, strange clothing, and other things, much like the fairly new scope strapped to Three-Finger's rusty rifle.

30 minutes in and Three-Fingers could hear it. It struggled to make it's way through the dense trees, it's hooves making loud splashes. Those hooves always slowed them down. Closer now, he could begin to hear it call to it's herdmates. Stupid thing, it was miles from it's kin. Three-Fingers took aim and fired a round into it's leg. It dropped and in no time he was upon it. He bound it quickly, making sure to stop the bleeding. A rag in it's mouth would stop it from alerting other predators. Dinner successfully recaptured, he threw it over his shoulder and began the trek back home.

Three-Fingers didn't know a lot. He didn't know this was a Celtic Engineer, captured while doing a survey for a new road. He didn't know the man was human, as human as him. He didn't know how afraid the man was, having escaped a den of mutants, now being brought back by a freak with no lips, no nose, and not enough fingers. He didn't know the war that had destroyed his people's nation so long ago still raged.

But he did know some things, like how to aim. That shot to the leg was fired with a purpose. Because, as a hunter, Three-Fingers also knew something else: live food doesn't spoil.

## ***Untitled Story – SKX31***

*Unknown date.*

There were nothing stopping those Celts, dressed in varying shades of green, from attacking his hometown, Wounded Knee, it seemed. Wave after wave of enemy infantrymen, tanks and helis approached the city like a massive starved beast looking to feast on some well-needed food. It was the offensive tactic that he had seen in so many campaigns - humanity's governments no longer saw men as men, only as tools for the War.

He and his fellow American comrades, all what he saw as believing and true Christians, were ready to defend as the soldiers commanded shouted over the rusty megaphone "Fire the artillery, now!"

He soon heard thunderous noises emitting from the inside of the small city as artillery shell after artillery shell fired from the Pachtton cannons hit the advancing wave. Not that it stopped the Celts one bit as the wave came closer to the city.

He had been fighting in this war since he was a child, due to official American policy. He was a veteran of similar charges, so the thoughts running in his mind were that if he survived, he would fight another day for America, the President and God. If he died, he would go to heaven. Nothing would stop him from killing in the name of defending his hometown.

The Celtic mass soon enough, not disturbed by the artillery barrages clashed with the American defense, and it was all man-to-man. It was all knife-to-knife, gun-to-gun combat as neither side were willing to use heavier weaponry. Only the Holy Order of American Engineers (and similar Orders in Viking and Celt lands) knew how to build houses anymore, and no one was willing to destroy what few available resources were left - good trees were scarce, after all.

As he slashed and shot his way against his Celtic opponents, something hit him. Undeterred, he kept fighting on, despite the gaping wound in his left knee. Amongst this carnage, there was nothing stopping him. Almost all of his forefathers had fought in the War in ages past, why should he stop?

And just as he was back on his feet, he was shot in the neck. A friendly fire - as the soldier collapsed and died, still clutching his knife and rifle. No one would remember his name as the battle for Wounded Knee continued to rage. Official American accounts would not list the casualties from friendly fire.

And in this world, as the War continues, humanity's hopes are all long gone, claimed by the swamps and the wastelands. The governments are on the brink of disaster, food for the day for ordinary humans are something that only dreams can conjure, and the Golden Age of Technology are now just a very distant memory.

This world has now gone so far that official American Christianity has intentionally confused the legendary General Patton with Jesus Christ. If the War ever ends, no one will see it as a peace. The population of the world will only see it as a declaration of war against the War.

## ***The People's Security Force – creepig***

Herein are my thoughts on the layout of the PSF, the monolithic and titanic military and police branch of the Celtic government.

The First Directorate, the Republican Army, is by far the largest, and the only one to practice conscription on ordinary citizens. Its name is a holdover from the days of the Celtic Republic. First Directorate deploys everything from foot soldiers to paratroopers to the mighty behemoth tanks used along the lines with New Vikingland. Due to their bulky armor and ubiquitous use of helmets to protect them from the hellish environment, First Directorate soldiers are essentially nameless and faceless until they gain enough rank to be known to their superiors. Death notices are published in batches once per week, unless the deceased is an officer, in which case the notice is sent out immediately.

The Second Directorate is the Grand Fleet, the Celtic navy. This is the oldest and most ceremonial of the directorates, and quietly claims heritage back to the first ship launched by the Celtic king. Their elite shock troop branch, the Marine Infantry, is used for shoreline raids and ship boarding. The Immortal Guard, the ceremonial bodyguard of the Great Leader Lycerius, is a part of the Marine Infantry.

The Celtic Air Force comprises the Third Directorate. Though decimated by the eternal war, they remain dedicated to the fight, and Third Directorate pilots often terrify even Marine Infantry shock troops with their fearlessness and self-sacrifice. Stories of Third Directorate pilots slamming an aircraft full of fuel into a column of tanks after running out of ammo are rather common on the nightly newsfeed.

The Fourth Directorate is the Strategic Rocket Corps. This directorate controls both the nuclear weapons of Celtania and the nuclear defenses, and the people of Fourth Directorate take morbid pride in being the long-reaching sword and shield of the Celtic people. At one time, the SRC was also responsible for the Celtic space program, but those times have fallen into distant memory.

The Fifth Directorate is the portion of the PSF that most citizens are most familiar with: Internal Security. The majority of Internal Security is composed of Uniformed Service police officers, who tend to be

decent people. However, a smaller portion of Internal Security is the Investigative Service, which is the shady secret police. ISIS troops are often whispered about, arriving in armored APCs at midnight to drag off people accused of treason, never to be seen again. Insurgent groups need to be careful of running afoul of ISIS, since the rumors say that the Fifth Directorate's Citadel holds a fate much worse than death at the hands of the Republican Army.

The Sixth and final Directorate is the Intelligence Corps. Sixth Directorate operatives work secretly, either spying and sabotaging in enemy lands, gathering information about enemy troop movements, or attempting to ferret out spies. The most visible part of Sixth Directorate is the Media Services Group, who are responsible for the propaganda pieces heard daily, and for supervising the official state radio stations.

## ***Perspective – creepig***

It's easy to lose perspective on a battlefield. The smoke and the haze gets into your eyes and burns away all reason and logic, leaving only the animal behind. Smart people do incredibly stupid things, and it can get people killed.

In the cockpit of her aging, battleworn strike fighter, Major O'Brien had a better view of the battle than most. The advancing Neo-Viking tank column snaked through the swamp, making its way to their target city. Her home city. It was a Viking sneak attack, just a handful of tanks, and she only just saw it in time to stop it.

Briefly, her thoughts flashed to her husband, recently dead in a Viking strike against his tank battalion, and her son. Aiden had managed to escape the horror of the front lines by testing into the Sixth Directorate and becoming an intelligence analyst. He had a future, and she couldn't be prouder of him.

The headset crackled. "Skyhawk Five, command. You are cleared for nuclear release. Say again, cleared for release. Give those bastards hell."

The hand on the throttle pushed forward and engaged the afterburner on the fighter's twin engines, while the other pulled back on the stick, abandoning her terrain masking and roaring into the sky. The Vikings knew she was here now, but it didn't matter - she was already on the path to lob her bomb at them. Her thumb flipped the switch to arm the weapon, and she waited for the right moment.

At the top of the arc, the Major depressed the launch button, only to be rewarded with the sound of the master caution. Two more presses refused to resolve the situation - her old fighter's weapons release had fused with the lack of maintenance, and she was carrying a live nuke with no way to jettison it.

"Command, Skyhawk Five. Weapon is armed, but not releasing." After a pause to consider her options, she added, "I'm taking it in manually."

The radio was silent for a moment. "Understood, Skyhawk Five. For the greater good."

"For the greater good," Major O'Brien replied, though she didn't push the button to transmit. Arcing her jet downward, she aimed for the center of the column and guided the ball of fiery death directly to the Viking bastards. For once, her perspective was perfectly clear.



## ***In Secret – kpascuzzi***

Shela shrunk back from the window as the soldiers marched past. The collars on their green trench coats pulled up against the foul drizzle falling from the sky. The patrols seemed to be everywhere these days, ever since the last guerrilla attack on the old railway station. Shela chanced a peek, drawing the curtains back slightly as a dozen boots clomped out of sight. Where was Brian? He should have been back from the factory by now. She glanced back at their meager table, set and waiting for her husband and her eye was drawn to battered cabinet that sat beyond it. She felt her pulse rise in her throat as she thought about it. It would be the death of them if anyone found out. The death of the whole neighbourhood, the soldiers wouldn't care. These things had a way of spread they had said. Why had she let Brian bring it here? Her hand shot to her throat and she let out a gasp as the door knob rattled suddenly. Had they come for her?

Brian entered their apartment in a rush of wet clothes and corrupted air. He took his face mask off and hung his tattered jacket on the hook by the door as he coughed. "Sorry I'm late" He said. "I got hung up at that new check point in Victory Square." Shela sighed. "I was worried you had gotten picked up" "No, still here, by the grace of God." "Don't," She hissed, casting a quick glance at the framed picture of the Dear Leader, "Someone will hear you!" "No one will hear us," He chuckled "You worry too much." Brian stepped in front of the cabinet and dropped to his knees. "Now be a dear and keep watch while I do this."

Shela took up her post by the window and drew her shawl tighter around her shoulders as her eyes scanned the street. Why did he insist on doing this every day? Didn't he realize how dangerous it was? She looked back at Brian as he began his prayer. The small wooden crucifix lurking in the cabinet beyond his bowed head. She turned away, resuming her vigil. That thing will be the death of us all.

## ***Looking at the Sky – FizzyFlapjack***

He looked up to the sky. There sat the moon. It was a strangely peaceful night, something he had heard of only in a fairy tale. His mother would tell him stories of how when people passed on, their spirits would go to the moon, ever so dark and mysterious. How crowded it must be now. The water of the shore crashed over and over, a never ending cycle of noise. It was the only noise. The silence and the peace was a strange thing to him, never before had he felt the need to hear something other than nature in its most wondrous form. Like a spell, there he came.

I've missed you, he signed to the dark figure approaching him.

"You won't have to anymore, I ran away from them." He told the silent character. Just like that, he became uncontrollably scared.

What if they find you?! Have you gone mad?

"No, they can't... I used a distraction..." He said in an ominous tone. The mute grabbed his tattered shirt, and pulled him into an embrace. What did you do? Tell me.

The darkness didn't answer, only wept silently without avail.

"Bad things... don't make me-" He was cut off as the silence broke with a sound of the poisonous thunder. Wordlessly, the silent one led the soldier back to the small shack outside the town that was home. Without knowing it, they laid on the bed, and drifted into the depths of an abysmal slumber. Yet, the mute lay waken on the mattress stroking the hair of the soldier. He didn't have the power to speak, and he was not put into service because of this. Instead, he swept the armor factory during the day to keep it relatively clean. He would never get to see the day that America put down her arms. It would always be sweeping the dust until the Vikings perished.

In the morning, he woke to see his beloved limp without air. He looked up at the sky. There sat the sun, the bringer of new death. He laid down next to his once known, and held his breath. Soon, he saw his lover sitting in the peaceful white garden.

He looked up at the sky. There sat the Earth. She was crying, for her scars were open. And she was bleeding, bleeding her most astonishing things.

It was a blood of beauty. A torn, silky ribbon that would only see repair when her life finally stopped tearing at it.

There was none.

## ***The Factory Worker – slumberday***

"Damn smoke," whispered Hrogar to himself as he continued his tedious life as a tank assembler. The factory was full of dread and unsafe working conditions, but If he wanted to go to bed full, he didn't have much of a choice. All the others around shared his fear among themselves as they kept drilling, hammering, cutting, welding, and bolting tanks into shape. The intercom rang, "Attention factory employees, the weekly production reports have come in. Line 47 has assembled 312 tanks in the last week, Line 12 has assembled 289 tanks in the last week, and Line 82 has assembled 230 tanks in the last week as well. Good job Lines 47, 12, and 82. You set the standard, as for a bonus, You get 1 week extra of food rations. Great job again and remember, Odin shows favor to those who rise to the challenge." "Oh gods be praised," exclaimed Hrogar as he continued his work on his 313th tank. He and his other co-workers shared jubilation among themselves. Ultimately however, Hrogar had a feeling it wasn't a weeks worth of food rations. To him, it felt more like a days worth. Out of nowhere, a blast of orange light appeared from behind them through the windows... A nuclear device detonated from the market district. Another one detonated in the The courthouse which was only 20 miles from the factory. Hrogar knew the next detonation would happen in the factory he was stationed at. Then a bright flash of light and heat, blasted on the other side of the factory. The atomic fireball rushed through the rest of the factory. As Hrogar was standing there, he felt a strange sensation of true joy and happiness as the fireball consumed him.

## ***The Viking and his Companion – slumberday***

Jorst was in a sour mood as he kept digging through trenches and foxholes from previous battles for whatever he could find. His irradiated dog, Fulsheim was sniffing around the rotting corpses to find a morsel of food to consume. As Jorst dug through a foxhole he spotted a small reflection of light in his eye. He quickly scurried to what he saw and began to dig away at the dirt and grime around it. He found a footlocker with a reinforced strodium laced lock holding the box shut.

He grew furious and began yelling and howling feverishly at the grey sky. He then came back to his senses and started to search the corpses that filled the foxholes and trenches. He searched and searched, hoping to find a key or a lock masher to unlock the foot locker and found nothing. Fortunately, Fulsheim had found a key in the foxhole akin to his owner and ran back to Jorst with it in one of his mouths.

Jorst gave him a pat on the head and a piece of simu-bacon from his pocket to his loyal friend. He inserted the key in the lock and with a twist of the wrist, the foot locker was unlocked. He was giddy with excitement and joy when he heard the click of the lock. He opened it and to his surprise, he found a nuclear device and ten thousand hjaalik inside the box. He was instantly filled with fear as he realized what he stumbled upon and threw himself back in distraught.

His curiosity got the better of him like a whore begging for more. So he inched closer to the device and noticed that the bomb itself was already triggered and realized it was a dud. He sighed relief and decided to take the money for himself. He grabbed it, stood up, and climbed out of the foxhole with Fulsheim following. He never felt this joyous since the factory he was stationed at was destroyed.

## ***Sweep and Clear: Part 1 – slumberland***

I was in contemplation as to how such an event could happen in all places but here... out of all the cities in New Vikingland, Heimdall was nuked... Goddamned spies. All those milk drinkers ever do in their spare time is circlejerk on themselves. It pissed me off, but I had to clear my mind of any emotion and focus on the mission.

The radio rang, "Odin's Raven, this is Asgaard what is your heading, over?" "Asgaard this is Odin's Raven. We are headed due south southeast into the square, over." "Copy, maintain heading then initiate protocol A09TF, over" "Copy Asgaard, over and out." I just knew this mission was going to be the most boring hell I would ever be involved in.

We reached our objective and disembarked our APC and awaited further orders from command. It was a dreadful wait. I just wanted to discharge a round up my ass just for some excitement, but before I could muster some courage to do so, command rang in. "Raven 2-1, this Asgaard. Your orders are to sweep the city for any stragglers and independents and eliminate them." "Copy Asgaard, over and out."

## ***Celtic Spymaster in American Territory –*** **erikir2012**

The tall, thin man with the deep blue eyes drew in a deep breath. Even here, in the residential concrete monolith that he lived in, there was the deep stink of petroleum and gas and industrial lubricant. After fifteen years of living in this hellhole of a nation, he never gotten used to it. Briac Sindersain, most senior agent of the Sixth Directorate in the Southern American sector, remembered the time when he had infiltrated American lines 15 years previously.

He remembered the dark grey sky, the same as his home. He remembered the people, who looked like him, the first time his blue eyes had fit in a crowd. He remembered the uniformed inquisition officers. He remembered his awe at the insanely huge churches. He remembered the fear, the uncertainty. He could run a thousand simulations in the safety of the homeland, but to do it for real in the heart of the enemy was another thing. Checking for tails, for people with too much interest. Make sure that you appear to look at nothing, yet see everything. And above all else, don't panic.

He remembered the plain, concrete building not unlike the one he now sat in. He remembered his first assignment, assassinate a low ranking official in the police force, but in such a way foreign terrorists are not blamed. He had a brief feeling of pride, thinking of the way he had accomplished that. He had simply planted evidence that the man was not pious enough, and the inquisitors had removed him.

He remembered his greatest triumph, the contacting and arming of the local separatist movement, the Swords of Freedom. Nine years ago, just after a major purge of the network, he had almost blindly stumbled across two men planning to steal guards' weapons and kill a high ranking Prophet, a "mouth of God", who was making a speech the next week. The two men had nearly killed him when they realized he was eavesdropping, thinking he would turn them in. He was amazed at how the little misunderstanding had almost cost him so much opportunity. He had helped them assassinate that "mouth of God", using explosives, and over the years they had together built an

incredible system of rebel cells, ranging all the way across the southern sector.

How many high officials had been killed? How many tanks or planes or bombs sabotaged and removed where they could never spill a drop of pure, Celtic blood? How many factories, ammo dumps, bases, stockyards, and churches had been bombed over the years. Even the periodic purges of heresy worked to further his goals, since they consumed manpower and material needed for the front, and even the most extensive purge had only taken out half of the Swords, while killing over three thousand other workers. No purge had ever come close to cutting out his entire network. Until this one.

It brought a cruel smile to his lips at how fanatically this new "High Inquisitor" was pursuing him and his. Six thousand disappeared already, entire buildings full of people taken out into the swamps and massacred to kill only a single "heretic".

His network would not survive this onslaught, he knew. It was too quick, too thorough. Already every one of the still living original cell, all four, had vanished into the dark, and evil, Halls of the Damned. He knew that he had gone too far, too many times. The beast was finally awake, and it hungered for his blood. He knew of no other spies or separatists in his sector who could escape this wave. Most were dead already. There was always some clue, someone who would talk. At the least, he thought, he had managed to get two of the surviving cells to pull off what he considered to be his finest attack yet...

He looked out the window at the Church of the Holy Blood, one of the largest, and oldest, churches in this sector. It was the first of these horrid edifices that he had first seen, but it had never been high on his list of targets. Until now.

At this moment, the new High Inquisitor and his staff were leading a massive congregation in prayer for salvation, and a prayer that all those who harbored heretical thoughts and doubt be purged from this earth with holy fire. Briac had seen many of the man's speeches, and they were all the same tone. This one, however, would end differently.

The church had stood for over 500 years, dating back to a time when huge, glass windows depicting scenes from their cursed book were the style. These windows formed the entire roof of the cathedral. In exactly six minutes, as the crowd would be at its most worked up,

when the chaos and emotion would be at its height, two different sets of charges would blow. One would destroy the foundation, causing the entire building to begin to crumble. Given the crush of people, it was unlikely that even a third would escape. But there was that second set of charges. The ones in the Windows, which would cause the giant sheets of glass to fall, shredding flesh from bone as they shattered. There was, of course, a single charge wired to the podium. It would not do for the primary target of this last, greatest attack to somehow escape, would it?

Briac looked down into the street below his residential complex. Sixteen trucks of Inquisition troops, in black body armor with golden letters, and long, vicious automatic weapons. They entered his building and climbed floor by floor.

They knew his room, and that he would most likely be there. They still intended to kill everyone else they found in the building, just to be safe.

Briac Sindersain pulled two objects from a hidden panel in the floor, turned to face the doorway, and waited, while counting down the seconds till his last, final strike. They reached the door. The crash of a battering ram once, twice, and on the third try the illegally reinforced door crumpled like a tin ration can.

He fired at the first man, killing him instantly with a round the head. He injured the next two badly with a wide spray of rounds, even as their guns fired wildly, making the small space rattle with their loud reports. The fourth man drew a bead on him, less then two seconds after the door went down, and fired. The Master Spy's ridiculously intelligent brain was splattered across the opposite wall.

The agent smiled. The will of God was done. This darkest of heretics, this foreign evil that had taken root in his beloved and holy country, was finally cut out.

In their momentary zealous haze, no agent saw the small device the dead man held in his left hand. A small detonator with a deadman switch.

It was amazing truly, the number of munitions that had been hidden in the crawlspace under the building. Never picky, Sindersain had never passed up an opportunity to grab some explosives, and not even he



would tell with true confidence just how many tonnes of bombs were under his complex. They were enough, however, to kill every single person with them, including the 190 still living Inquisition agents, and the foundations atomized in an instant, and the walls spontaneously turned to exploding concrete shrapnel.

Three quarters of a mile away, the Church of the Holy Blood suffered a similar fate. Hundreds died either in the press of bodies, as the earth opened, or as the windows fell and images of their God butchered them.

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A man sitting in a small office in the Headquarters of the Sixth Directorate reads over a report sent by one the last remaining spies in the southern sector of America. It includes numbers, facts, and names, and at the very end there is a note. A few lines.

"It has been my most glorious honor to stand by my duty, and make the enemies of our great Celtic nation quake in fear and bathe in their own blood. My only wish in this life is that my name will be remembered, and that by my work, Celtic sons and daughters will one day live in freedom and peace."

The man stopped reading. He made a few notes, including one recommending Agent Sindarsain for a Medal of Outstanding Patriotic Service (Posthumous). Then, he placed his head in his hands, and Girven Sindarsain, Head of the sixth Directorate, wept.

## **Agent O. – pwntuspilate**

They say it only works one out of ten times. Now to most that would seem pretty discouraging but I saw us as just about due. Agent Z was the furthest we'd made it in a while, got to the second security checkpoint before those moron Vikings wizened up to what was under his coat. Agents K, F, and L didn't even get to the first gate before they were cut down. Agents C and Y went by sea, which was a mistake. I doubt they made it a few miles before something from above or below put an end to that fool's errand. Agent U didn't even make it out of New York, got a bad case of radiation poisoning two days before his launch, and he never got better. Always a weak one, that Agent U. And then there was Agent L, who was halfway through his train ride when, ironically, a nuclear missile went off vaporizing a nearby howitzer squad, with the train as collateral. Ironically, of course, because he had a nuke just like it waiting in his briefcase.

Nukes didn't fly much anymore, which made Agent L's untimely demise that much more of a rarity. SDI defense kept the cities safe from missiles, and most armies moved too quick across the high-speed rails to be pinned down by anything as slow as a falling bomb. These days, getting a nuke where it wants to go requires...cleverness.

That's where I would be different. Of course, everyone had high hopes out the gate but mine were actually founded in something beyond narcissism. I took every precaution, thought everything through. When everyone else had gone home for the night after some 14 hour training session, I would stay at headquarters, pouring over anything I could find about Viking culture. I wasn't just prepared to keep my head down and try to blend in. I was going to become one of them. They will accept me as one of their own, until the flash goes off. They will never even know the truth.

That was how Agent A had done it. He was the one that inspired this silly naming business. Before him agents had all sorts of names but ever since him it's been 'Agent N' or 'Agent W' or some other 'homage' or whatever the hell you want to call it. I suppose I'm not any different, in that way. Anyway, Agent A must have been quite the chameleon, since he slipped into one of those coastal cities without arousing a whiff of suspicion. Now the city is just chalk and gamma

particles. And Agent A was the stuff of legend. My grandfather was six when it happened. He still remembers it, clear as day.

Of course, that was only the beginning. The Vikings were a proud people, and they weren't going to stand for sly play. The Celts didn't much care for it either, but helping the Vikings was the last thing on any Celt's mind. So the Vikings launched a counter-attack, throwing wave after wave of howitzers at our outer cities, but our mechanized infantry were ready, putting most of them down before they even raised up their guns. Wave after wave of the cannons advanced and promptly retreated. Ocean of metal and gunpowder. Most of the time waves crash along the shore meaninglessly, retreating back to the foamy depths before they make much of an impression. But sometime they rise up and take hold, and they don't give back. Fifty years ago Boston slid into the sea. My grandfather remembers that too.

And now I will become the rising sea that drowns this city. The timeless spirit that crushes machine and mind. Fear and anger will once again spread like a cancer through the Viking empire. Foundations will crumble, and they will slide further and further into the roiling sea, until they all asphyxiate beneath the blue. It is inevitable. How do I know? How am I so sure?

I am already here. The countdown is started.

## ***Front Lines Journal – aes419***

### **June 12, 3991**

The first day of boot camp was awful. We ran all day, for at least 20 miles. A friend of mine Johnson is planing an other revolt I know it wont work. There's no way he could get any guns to do it even if he did there's no way it would last any more then a week. I have to go its expection time and journals are forbidden.

Private Patrick O'Neal

Celtania infantry devision 193728473

### **June 13, 3991**

Boot camp is staring to get even worse we have started to run 40 miles a day, and there feeding us even less , I don't know how that was even posable. I'll up keep you up to date

Private Patrick O'Neal

Celtania infantry devision 193728473

## ***The Inheritors Saga – falchimjager***

Inheritors By J.D. Geist [ Log: 13:30 May 2nd, 3991. Sector 5, New Wales] "This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children," spoke an aged man, as a half burnt cigar smoldered between his fingers. "And I'm going to guess that's another one of your beloved quotes Halifax?" snapped a younger man, his eyes rolling in annoyance. "It is," replied Halifax calmly, "and one that damn near sums up our world, I don't think even you can argue that? Can you Renault?" "Of course I can't old man!, that would be like trying to argue that Earth's not round. War sucks, ever since this November offensive started up in the North Front, rations have been low. Child starvation is back above 50% and you don't even want to know how hard it was to get these smokes." Halifax did not respond immediately. Instead, he simple looked at Renault, his eyes fixed, not in anger over his friend's remarks, but sadness. He drew a long puff from his cigar. It was a decent blend nearly as the natural one he had sampled years ago. Halifax had to admit it was a kind favor to bring him one. It was kind of Renault to converse with a man like him at all. Finally, he opened his mouth to speak, "I'm not talking about the November offensive," Renault titled his head in confusion, "I'm not talking about that or the Summer Raids or even the 715th Great Struggle, I am talking about everything, the very state of our world." Renault's eyes narrowed at this remark. He generally liked the old man despite his eccentricities, but comments like this always managed to find a way under his skin. Vague, and dangerously philosophic, they reminded him why Halifax was an outcast. Good comrades did not have time to ask such things, especially not when the vile Vikings were attacking once again. The young man attempted to request explanation, but he was cut off, "This war, this eternal war, has destroyed our world. Tell me friend, would you believe that where we stand now was no coast but a great mountain named Snowdon. It was, before the great floods." Renault's mouth dropped. This was too far. He had heard stories about the World Before the War, bed time tales mothers used to soothe their children. He imagined they had some truth about them and he knew the world had been a kinder place before our enemies launched the first nukes centuries ago, but to know specific landforms;

such information could have only one source. "Where did you learn that?" demanded Renault. "In an old geography book that has been re-transcribed from a text dated to the 2300s. Truly it is a gem of a find," answered Halifax remaining strangely calm despite the growing air of tension in the room. "A book!" balked Renault, "I thought you had given up illicit readings since the police last raided your place." Renault's voice was sharp but not hateful. Despite, his efforts to conceal it, his concern for the old man was evident, "If they found out about this... The Great Lycerius's mercy can only be tested so far." Halifax extinguished his cigar and rose to his feet. "I am a Preserver, a holder of lost knowledge and the true past. Like so many before me, I must learn and I must remember so these will not be forgotten. This is my charge, and it cannot be abandoned," replied to old man reciting the creed of his secret order. "Your Charge?" shouted Renault incredulously, "You really think it's your charge to defy the party in times like these? The Preserves are a cult, rebels. The party will hunt you just like they hunt insurrectionists." With those last words, Renault's mind flashed through images of rebel corpses paraded across the news. He always found the thought of Celt killing Celt to be deplorable. Granted, those men and women had risen against the Party and hurt the nation, but they had seen their children all die to feed soldiers and their supplies cut to build tanks. He often wondered if he would have done the same if he had been in their shoes. The Party had its faults, but whether they rose with guns or mere books, those who rose in defiance were always struck down. Halifax was a strange man, but he was also a good man. He had always been kind to him, sharing his few luxury rations and telling great tales and fables. Renault would not let endanger himself for such foolishness. "Halifax, you need to stop this!" he pleaded, "A man your age wouldn't last long on the front, and they would sure as hell cart you off if they found what you had been doing." "I'm not so sure that would be the case my young man," chuckled Halifax, his dismissive laugh shocking Renault, "I can't believe the wise Great Lycerius would waste such a precious resource as a Preserver. The party may never admit it, but they need us. They need what we know, and I would wager my life there are a few of my cult in the Party Councils. Knowledge, of all things including the past, is needed in war Renault. It is needed as much as soldiers and bullets." Just then the television sparked to life

and the two men turned to view the official bulletin that had halted their debate. As of 13:45 today, The Peoples Party has named Stanley Masters, High Advisor and Strategist, of our proud nations combined military. The High Advisor has already led troops to victory countless times and had already devised a plan that will bring the Celtic People glorious victory. With the support of our stalwart American allies and the continued guidance of our beloved defender and servant, The Great Lycerius, we had conquered the wretched Viking hordes and finally claim our rightful place as lords of a peaceful world. Duty and courage my brothers and sisters, all honor to our people and its party! The screen returned to its former blackness, but both Halifax and Renault remained transfixed. The newsreader was always fiery and optimistic even when outlining the effects of the newest tragedy, but today's announcement contained something new, something alien. It contained a true glimmer of hope. Did this new commander actually have a plan to win the war? Is such a thing even possible? Renault looked at Halifax as if to beg for some insight. The old man met his glance and answered, simply "I don't know." Victory, the word echoed in Renault's mind. It had been chanted more times than he could count, but it was never more than a dream; a fantasy. The thought of victory and peace as a reality was beyond comprehension. For a brief moment, Renault let his imagination drift off into these musings until he remembered their previous conversation and jerked back to focus. "Well even if we do finally win this war, it won't matter for you if the police find out you haven't abandoned your cult's practices!" declared Renault. "Son, if we win, this 'cult' might be the only thing that matters. For victory to be complete we must rebuild, and the Preserver's will hold the tools needed for this task. Besides Renault, I don't really believe I am going to be turned in anytime soon." "And why not?" inquired Renault, "If anyone discovers what you're doing there going to turn you in or face punishment themselves. Hell, I like you old man, but if you think I would face the prison brigades to keep your secret you're..." "Oh I severely doubt you betray me," interrupted Halifax laughing quietly. "And why not?" barked Renault, his eyes narrowed weary of the meaning behind this last assertion. "Because my friend if you condemn me, you condemn yourself. All those stories you gleefully listened to, those were not fables or legends, they were true. I have told you many things, volumes of ancient knowledge, and

you have remembered them all. You are yourself now a master of history and guilty of the same crimes you accuse me of committing. Renault, you are now a Preserver. Welcome to the Order.”



## ***A Futures Past: A Celtanian Excerpt –*** **RagingCeltic**

The long, dank hallway was near pitch black save an odd, small bluish glow at the end. Ceyn and Aine cautiously pushed thorough the waste-high sludge of swamp-water that poured in as they opened the bunker doors. Was this a ancient Vikinus ruin? The odd stone architecture of the building did not match any known Celtanian structure Ceyn or Aine knew, yet they were so close to the border of their nations that it was possible this was once Vikinus land.

As they moved forward they began to cough, the air stale from an unknown period of entombment. As they drew closer to the light, they were stuck dumb by what they saw: it was magic, a flat panel of light hovering in mid-air and attached to nothing! On the panel's surface Ceyn could make out what appeared to be writing. It slightly resembled the Common, but there were strange words that he had not seen before. In the middle of the panel was a circular image, with a line that stuck vertically down the middle and would split and move away from center, disappear, and then appear whole again. Ceyn reached out his finger to touch the floating light.

"Ceyn, no!" Aine warned, but it was too late. As Ceyn's fingers intersected with the light it blinked out of existence, enveloping them in pitch dark. A clunk. A long shuddering groan. They both grabbed their ears in pain as what must have been a Banshee of Ancient Lore screeched all around them. The corridor shook them off their feet, sending them deeper into the muck.

The screeching died down, and the corridor grew still.

Aine spat out the swamp-water and regained her footing. She fumbled around in the dark and found Ceyn. She could hear him gagging.

"Are you alright," she asked.

"Yeah, you?"

"Idiot! Why did you have to--" A blinding light suddenly flared around them, making them cover their eyes. As they adjusted to the light, they looked towards its source.

Ceyn stood in shock. Aine began to scream.

# ***The Last Historian – mitro***

## **INTRODUCTION**

You want to know the truth?

Sometimes there is truth within a lie. You must know that, or else you would be like the rest of the sheep, happy to swallow whatever propaganda is spoon fed to you. No, you are different. You read between the lines and you were not content. That is why you are here, is it not? It is why you left the safety of the caves and went blindly into the swamps. You escaped from the mutants and the barbarians and now you are here. You came searching for the truth and you found us. But...we can't tell you the truth.

How much has been lost? Does anyone really know? The Disaster robbed us of so many things. Our homeland, our glory, our history. The scribes worked tirelessly to copy everything down before the thinking machines failed, but they were too late. What little that was saved was lost as humanity passed through the Decline and the Ascension. And then this war came. The Endless War. The Everlasting War.

The Eternal War.

Now whatever is left has been destroyed in the name of God, Gods or Marx. The post-humans who led us out of the Disaster now sap us dry to feed their unquenchable thirst for battle. Our bodies, minds and souls are nothing but cannon fodder to them. Their greedy black hearts will be the doom of us all.

We can't tell you the truth, because frankly we just don't know. We won't lie, because lying requires an intent to deceive and we, the Historians, will never deceive you. We freely admit to our ignorance. What we have to share with you should be consumed with a good helping of doubt and skepticism. Yet, it is the only history we have left and we will pass it on to you.

This is the history of our civilizations.

This is the history of Minerva.

## **DISCOVERY**

Once Minerva was just a dot in the sky.

Ancient humans used telescopes to get their first glimpse of our homeworld by watching it pass across its star. It took more powerful telescopes positioned at the outskirts of the First System to see the world for what it really was. Finally probes were used to bring back samples and confirm what everyone was thinking.

The planet was perfect.

There was no need for the Engineers to reshape the world to make it livable for humans. The world had one star which the planet circled every 300 days. A day on Minerva was 25 hours and it had one moon to give the planet tides. Life existed, but it was extremely primitive. The first Farmers did not have to worry about their crops. Human foodstuffs were made of sterner stuff and grew wild, choking out the native life. Before long one could only find native plant life in special preserves, long destroyed by the Powers in the futile attempt to feed their starving populaces in the early centuries of the War.

Still it would not be until the discovery of the Network before the first humans arrived. What is the Network, you ask? How can we describe it without sounding mad? We are surprised you are still here after learning that humanity is far older than you realized. That we are invaders to this planet. Much of the true history has been altered by the post-humans to bolster their reign. Perhaps they are right for once. Knowledge that our perceived glory is less than it seems is a difficult burden to bear. It would make the horrors we unleashed on ourselves that much worse.

But where were we...Yes, the Network. The Network is what allowed humans to break the shackles that kept them imprisoned in the First System. Consider how dangerous it was to travel here from your home? Would it not have been easier if there was a tunnel underground to avoid the dangers of top side? Mole holes to the various farm caves allow the lower classes to travel and trade without risking the death that lurks above. The Network provided the same safety and allowed humanity to circumvent the dangers of the Dark Abyss. With the vast nothingness of space no longer a threat, worlds like Minerva were finally open to the brave souls who sought our the next frontier.

We could use the Network, but we did not understand it. Scientists and Engineers debated how it worked, but they only ever agreed on one

thing...it was not natural. Someone made it. But who, or what, were they? Was it some divine being or some unimaginably advanced alien space bat?

We could discuss the origins of the Network at length, as we have done for many nights, but the Network was only a tool to be used by our ancestors. A stepping stone to the paradise they would eventually call home.

## **COLONIZATION**

There was serious consideration of naming the planet Eden.

Mythologists, while a minority in First System, made up an inordinate amount of the early colonists who trekked out into the unknown. It would be the Italians, however, who were the first to arrive on this new world who gave it their name. Fleeing the religious wars that racked their homeland, they become obsessed with their glorious past. So they named the planet after one of their old gods. New arrivals adopted the name when they laid the foundations for their homes.

Other colonists arrived shortly thereafter. The Egyptians were refugees escaping the devastation of the Resource Wars. Apparently our ancient homeworld came close to fighting an Eternal War over the scarce resources of the planet. Lucky for them, but not for us, they had the Network to give them access to new deposits of scarce material. Perhaps they too have succumbed to the inevitable, but we may never know...

Our minds keep wandering and time is of the essence. There were many reasons why our ancestors came to Minerva. The Celts and Sioux arrived to preserve their culture. The Americans and the Nordics came to build an empire. Some came as individuals, such as the post-mortals. Too old to remain loyal to a nation, they sought adventure in the great unknown to hold back the crushing boredom that had claimed so many of their kind.

Of course nations tried to claim the entire planet to themselves, but it was impossible enforce such a claim so far from the power centers of First System. Yet try they did try and blood was spilled for the first time of Minervan soil. Those wars were nursery brawls compared to our war. The pointlessness of fighting over such a large and bountiful planet eventually set in after a generation. What came next can only be described as a Golden Age.

The people of Minerva lived in peace. They traveled and traded freely among each other, yet still kept their distance. They had no interest in losing their identity to some global human culture as it happened in First System. Visiting was fine, but all were encouraged to go back home eventually. Some cultures even changed their identities over time, like the aforementioned Italians who became so enamored with their prehistorical legends that they became the Romans of old.

Humanity had learned other lessons as well. We remember learning that much of the original homeworld was left uninhabitable, so laws were put in place to preserve Minerva. The ground was not broken to find scarce minerals. The skies were not polluted with factories to build weapons. We even rode on the back of horses once again for fear that our transports would poison the world. Everything necessary to maintain their advanced society came through the Network. Thinking machines kept society running efficiently, allowing humans to pursue other, more worthy pursuits. Minerva played its part in the Human Sphere by feeding dozens of worlds with its rich bounty.

We wish we could have been there to see it. We are old, but none of us are old enough to remember such a magical era. We would like to think we could return one day to such an existence, but the Disaster ruined that dream...

## **DISASTER**

Some thought the world would end in fire. Others in ice. Wise men predicted epic battles and a final judgment for mankind. The prophets, priests, scientists and fools all agreed on one thing: the end would be swift and sudden.

When the Disaster did happen, no one noticed...at first.

The Network made travelling between systems easier, but not communications. News from the Human Sphere came by courier ship and even though they came more often than the leviathans that took our food, they still did not arrive every day. A few days without contact from the wider galaxy was no cause for concern.

As weeks went by, however, people began to worry. There was a talk in the air about war between the systems, but no one knew who would have done such a thing. The Epsilonese were always trying to challenge the First System, but their rivalry was one of culture, not

political domination. Meanwhile, the merchants fretted as their goods sat waiting to travel to their destination.

Finally after an emergency meeting of the representatives of the colonies, the High Guard was ordered to send a patrol ship to enter the Network and seek out news about what was happening. The High Guard were a lost order of star knights from our shared past. They were tasked with patrolling the System for pirates and terrorists. They were well suited for this mission.

We wonder sometimes what it must have been like on that ship. Reaching out to where the portal to the Network was located. The Thinking Machines made their calculations and the engines readied themselves to enter a new dimension...

And nothing happened.

What did they do? How many times did they try again before contacting their masters? Did the rulers of Minerva believe them at first? Did they angrily demand that they try again? As the first notes of panic spread through our forefathers, did anyone truly understand what was happening?

We don't know what those men and women were feeling in those dark days, but we do know what happened. We were cut off from the Network. Days went by before the official announcement was made, but rumors had already caused panic and violence. The great merchant houses collapsed and millions found themselves out of work. At the height of the Panic the post-humans emerged from their lethargy like vampires awakening after the sun went down. They provided their collective wisdom and centuries-old experience to guide our leaders through the Disaster.

Calm spread. The post-humans spread the lie that this was all temporary. The Network, they said, had done this before on other worlds. Weeks? Months? Regardless of the amount of time, the lifeline of Minerva would open once again. It was there first of many lies. The Records were changed to bolster their untruth. The Historians protested, but they were silenced. The founders of our ancient order fretted.

Food was plentiful. Work was available for those willing to do it. The Thinking Machines kept society running smoothly. People went back to

their lives with only a little anxiety about the future. Yet the panic was just a rash. A signal of worse things to come.

How worse? Remember there were no factories on Minerva and very few engineers. The comforts our ancestors enjoyed came through the Network. What happens when something breaks and no one can replace it?

## ***War of Ages – R7type***

She was crying. It was the only sound amidst the devastation, borne out of a complete loss of all hope. I could hear it but I could not move, frozen with the horror and pain. I turned to survey the rubble of our enclave and I couldn't find her. She was crying. Why is this all we had ever known?

My name is Caso Corin and I was born to fight like everyone on our planet. The war has been raging for generations and it is all I have ever known. We win, we lose, we fight, we win, we lose, we fight... for what? I am a Viking, once a proud race of warriors with a code and honour, now a shell of desperate humanity riding the same wave as our enemies, the wave of death and destruction, the wave of Eternal War.

The Americans, Celts and Vikings all know their place. We are all the same. Like the feuds of old no-one knows exactly how it started but each of us believes we must destroy, butcher and eradicate the other. This is doctrine, this is dogma, there will be no end.

The first years are shrouded in mystery however it is known we went from a time of "peace", a word so foreign it has lost all meaning, to all out global thermonuclear war. The stockpiles of the 20th, 21st and 22nd centuries rained hellfire across our world bringing desperation, suffering and loss. No one was spared and 90% of all life was ended in all but seconds.

The new dark ages began.

When the first bombs dropped they hit the major cities, like beacons waiting to be annihilated they were the easy targets, millions died. Once the fallout had settled a new, more subtle force began to erode the population. It started off with the weak, the elderly, sickly children faltering while the strong tried to escape their torment. Trudging forward they walked to nowhere, individuals fell and eventually the strongest became sick, they had no way of knowing their fate was sealed, the radiation sickness consumed them and with no medicine, no way to fight they were blind and alone, millions died.

The famine began, with the land badly irradiated and useless for farming starvation and desperation forged a new force, alliances



flourished and the germination of the 3 great nations had begun. A rag tag group of bandits, outlaws and desperado's began to develop infrastructure and with the emergence of the Leaders conflict returned. They fought for land, they fought for the meagre resources and they fought because they were lost, the world and god had forsaken them - an epoch in human history was over.

What has followed is 1700 years of conflict, heroes have come, villains have prevailed, good and evil have fought side by side with only polarised ideals driving them. Ideals and instinct, war is nature.

This is my story, this is how the war of ages was won.